

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SUGAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 X

— the Beautiful World —

電撃文庫

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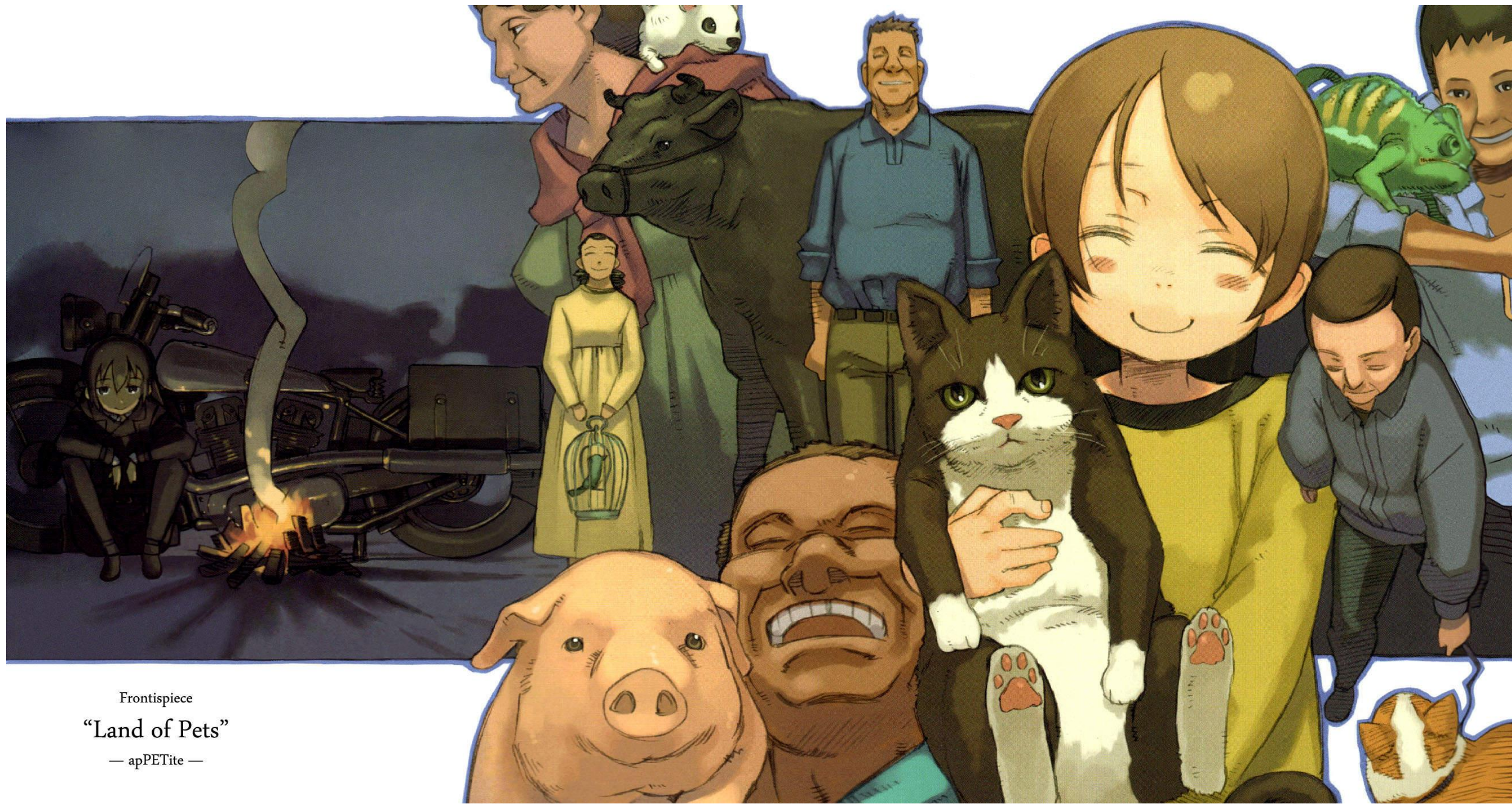
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Frontispiece
“Land of Pets”
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One autumn day, Kino and Hermes arrived at a certain country.

The country’s walls surrounded a not too wide, level terrain lined up with many multi-storied houses crowded together. A lot of people lived in it. As soon as Kino entered the country, she noticed that all of the citizens have some sort of animal with them, without exception.

A person walking with a leashed dog. A person holding a cat in his arms. A person carrying a birdcage with a parrot inside. A person with a weasel on top of his head. A person strutting by the road on a horse.

“They look like...pets,” Hermes said.

“Yeah...,” Kino replied with a look of surprise.

Kino leisurely rode Hermes downtown. Lined up in the country’s main street were all sorts of shops selling items related to pets—veterinary clinics, parlors, and the like. They were everywhere.

Even the interior of the hotel referred to them by the gate sentry was full of animals. There were more restrooms for different type of animals than that for humans.

“That’s right. In our country, the citizens have an obligation to keep pets,” the hotel boy said.

“Obligation?”

"Yes. All healthy citizens over ten years of age shall learn how to raise pets at home and at school. Any animal will do as long as it is registered as an acceptable pet by our Pet Regulations Committee."

"Why?" Hermes asked.

"Well, to say in a word, 'heart'. We have a duty to take care of a life. Because of this, we can cultivate a sense of responsibility or a feeling of duty, as well as generosity and kindness in everyone."

"You mean—"

"'Cultivation of aesthetic sensibility'?" Hermes said.

"That's correct! You sure are very knowledgeable, mister motorrad," the boy said in delight. Kino shot Hermes a mystified glance. Then the boy added,

"That is why every single person in our country is a vegetarian. You see, we can't just eat an animal that is considered a pet by someone."

—

The next day, Kino and Hermes rode all around the country for sightseeing.

Breeding houses for each and every kind of pet. Pet shows. Classes on pet-keeping. Therapeutic sessions for people who were depressed after losing their pets, and so on.

"What are your thoughts?" Hermes asked.

"It was completely different from the rumors..." Kino answered.

"Isn't it? Were you tricked again Kino?"

"What do you mean by 'again'?"

In the evening, several men were waiting for Kino and Hermes to return. They introduced themselves as officials of the Pet Regulations Committee, and asked for Kino's impressions about the country.

"Our country has a gift for you, Miss Kino."

"What is it?"

"As a remembrance for entering our country, we will present you with one animal of your choice. Of course, we won't force you if you don't want to, but how about it? Won't you take a lovable pet to remember our country by, and also to serve as your personal stabilizer? It will be prepared by tomorrow."

—

The next day, the noon of the third day since they entered the country.

Kino finished the necessary arrangements and arrived at the gates for departure.

At the gates, the animal Kino requested the previous evening was inside a cage. It was a chicken.

"Thank you very much. I was taught how to raise it yesterday," Kino expressed her thanks as she received it.

"Please cherish it," the guard and the government official said in chorus.

—

Upon departure, while running leisurely through the forest road,

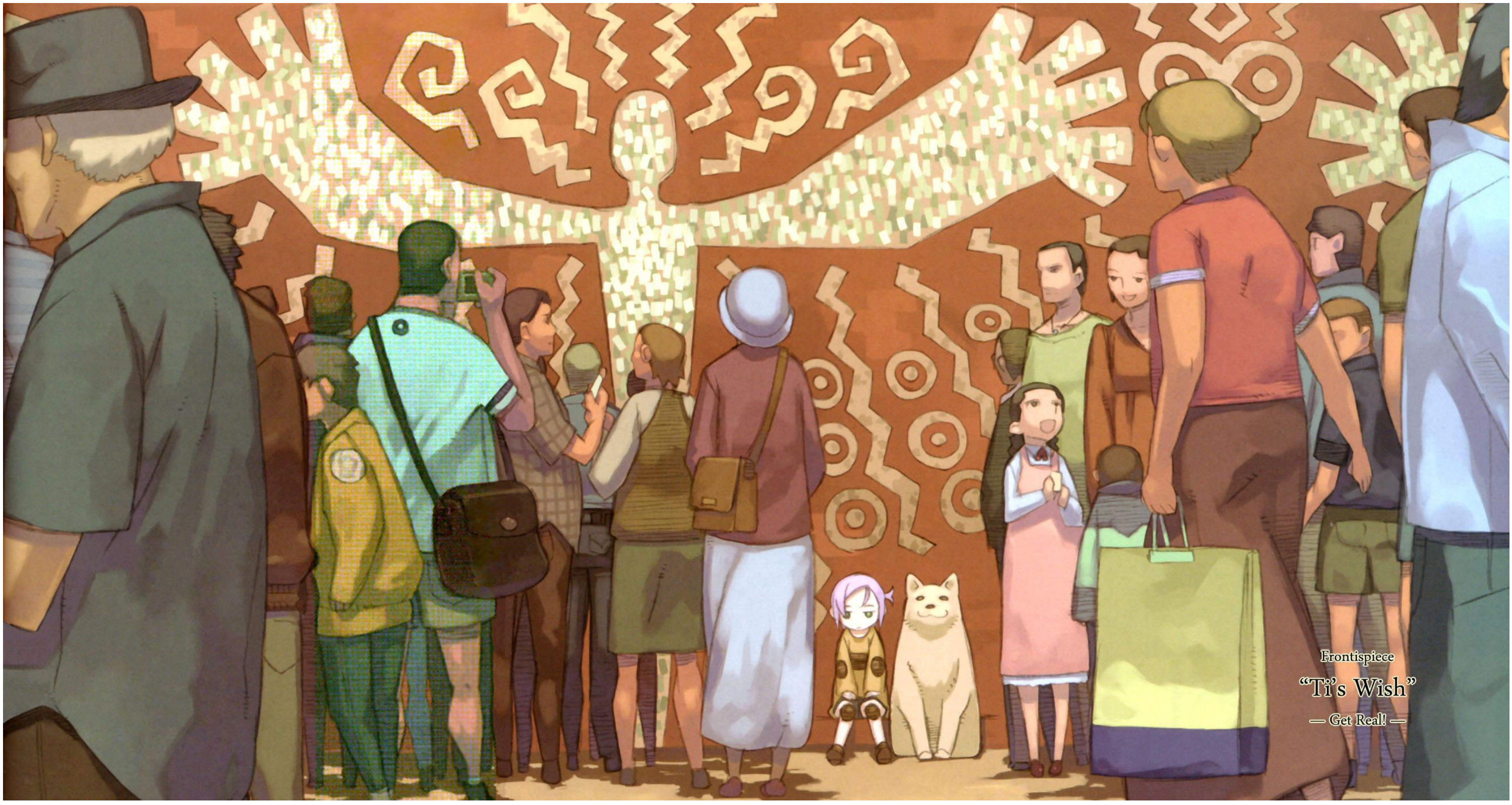
"It's just as the rumors say...," Kino said.

"I see now. So there really is something like it," Hermes said. On top of the bag on his carrier, there was the sleeping bag and the birdcage.

That evening.

Kino camped inside the forest. Her dinner was juicy chicken barbecue, its belly stuffed with spices prepared in the country.

"There truly is one. A country that gives travelers food for free."



Frontispiece
"Ti's Wish"
— Get Real! —

Frontispiece: “Ti’s Wish” —Get Real!—

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, fluffy white fur. I always look like I’m smiling, but it does not necessarily mean that I am. I was just born that way.

Lord Shizu is my master. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, lost his hometown in some complicated way, and is currently traveling via buggy.

Our companion is Ti. She is a quiet girl who is fond of hand grenades, lost her hometown in some complicated way, and became a part of us.

—

We emerged through a field of waving summer grass, and by the time we got to the country, they were holding festivities.

It was an annual celebration for the harvest, so the people there were excited. Lord Shizu went off to find some sort of town hall to get permission to stay and see if the place met his qualifications for permanent residence. Aside that, it was merrymaking as far as the eye could see.

Ti and I walked on the main street. There was a drawing of a figure on a huge brick building on whose body were pasted many metal sheets, making it a plate of armor. Each sheet had writing in charcoal.

We listened to the people talk and managed to gather that they wrote their wish on these sheets. Putting up the wish during the festival would make it come true, it seemed.

Looking up, there were hopes from—

"I hope I get a raise," "I hope my crops flourish next year, too," "I hope my grades improve,"

—to—

"I wish for good health for my family," "I wish for a healthy baby," "I hope he loves me, too."

Etc., etc. They were all modest yet selfish wishes.

"Well, now—travelers? Here's a sheet. Write a wish."

Lord Shizu passed off that privilege to Ti. I suggested that he wish to find a country that would accept us, but—

"I'd rather act than wish."

So he said, leaving Ti and me here to find someone who could tell him about immigration in this country.

"..."

Charcoal and metal sheet in her hands, I explained to a blank Ti that she was to use them to write a wish. Then I asked if she could write.

"..."

Silent, she began writing. I suppose that was my answer.

Gripping the charcoal, Ti wrote her wish in splendid letters:

"I hope everyone's wishes come true."

I was genuinely shocked. It was the most excellent thing I had ever seen out of her.

"..."

The silent Ti handed the sheet over to a countryman.

"Ohh, this is marvelous!"

The middle-aged man smiled broadly and handed it to the person in charge of mounting them. He too commented the same and began climbing the ladder.

Ti's wish was pasted up and became another scale in the armor.

I looked up at Ti and said, "That was a very kind and wonderful wish, but what was the reason for it? Could you tell me?"

I thought that she would say nothing, but then she dropped her gaze to mine and replied.

"Because it will not work anyway."

—

Lord Shizu returned. It seemed immigration was not possible.

Prologue

“A Certain Man’s Journey · b”

— Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa · b —



Prologue: “A Certain Man's Journey · b” - Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa. · b -
Prologue: “A Certain Man's Journey · b” —Life is a
Journey, and Vice Versa. · b—

At the end of the short recess—

The man mounted the horse again.

He thanked the old woman and the young girl courteously—

And then looked ahead—

Slowly advancing on the straight road into the forest.

He returned to his journey.

Under the blue sky, as the man's figure became smaller and smaller,

“Will there be a time when his journey ends?”

The girl asked the old lady.

“Of course.”

She replied right away.

The girl raised her face and looked at the old lady standing beside her.

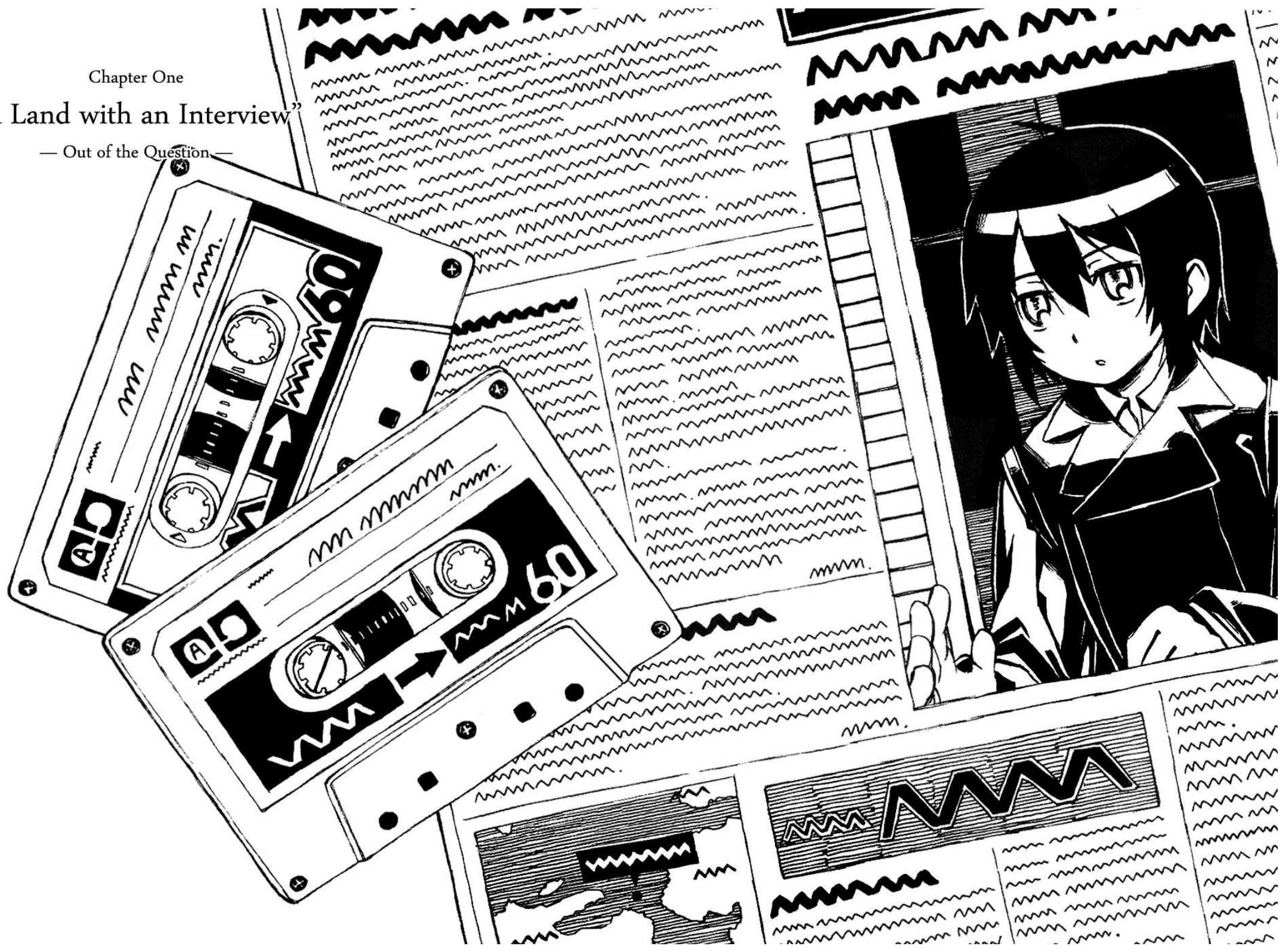
She lowered her face to meet the girl's gaze.

Prologue: " A Certain Man's Journey • b " - Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa. • b -
"There's no such thing as a journey that doesn't end."

Chapter One

“A Land with an Interview”

— Out of the Question —



"Interview Land" —Out of the Question—

The National Daily

Spotlight Feature: Interview on the Streets

Kino the Traveller - A Young Traveller Journeying to the Future

Welcome to the Special Edition of [**Interview on the Streets**], the regular feature showcasing the lives of people we meet on the streets through an impromptu interview!

Agreeing to an interview for us this time was Kino, a traveller who visited us last week and departed after a three-day stay.

One of our reporters happened to meet Kino just before her departure, and managed to snag us an interview. Why does this young woman travel so? What goes through her mind as she journeys?

Looking at Kino, I became sure of this--when the desire to travel overtakes you, age is but a number.

Kino tells us that she first decided to leave her homeland at the young age of twelve.

Kino: In our country, twelve is the age of majority. Having been pretty against the conformity of it all, I guess twelve was the perfect age for me to make my decision. I decided on it on my birthday, and I was out of the country before a year had passed. (Laughs)

It would be unthinkable to have our children fix up a motorrad and leave the country at the tender age of twelve, as Kino had. Different countries have different lifestyles and educations. But this reporter believes that there is no age too young to choose a life goal for oneself and attain the courage to move towards it.

But hadn't her parents opposed the idea?

Kino: Of course they were against it. (Laughs) But my parents were stubborn people who have to see everything through to the end. Once I'd made up my mind, they cheered me on wholeheartedly. Now that I think about it, I think I've really taken after them in that sense. (Laughs)

That was how Kino left her country. Naturally, a sudden long-term journey was too much for her. Initially she repeatedly visited nearby countries and returned to her homeland regularly. After all, things are always difficult at first. This applies even more in one's youth. Though her journey was full of failures and disappointments, Kino, in the midst of her despair, happened to run across an elder she calls her Master. It was a serendipitous meeting in the forest.

Kino: I was just realizing how much I was lacking. I lived for some time with Master, learning all kinds of things--like how to handle firearms.

Having realized that a certain degree of preparation and training are absolutely necessary in any endeavour, Kino spent these days under her Master's care, training to ready herself for her journey.

Kino: But now that I think about it, that was too much of a coincidence, don't you think?

Kino still has her doubts about some things. Was it truly a only coincidence that she happened to meet such a warm-hearted mentor out of nowhere? Perhaps her parents had worriedly sent an acquaintance her way to ensure her safety?

Kino: Maybe so, but... I'm afraid there's no way to know at this point.

Unfortunately, Kino's parents passed away in a fire while Kino was in training. Kino tells us that once she received the terrible news, she abandoned the idea of going home.

Kino: I finally worked up the courage to go on a lengthy journey. Even Master told me, "You're ready". So I decided to go as far as I could possibly go. That was three years after my twelfth birthday.

And that was how Kino left on her journey proper. What is daily life like for her, travelling from one country to another?

Kino: What do I worry about most? Food. (Laughs) I usually live off of portable rations when I'm on the road, but I always wolf down any fruit I find along the way. (Laughs)

What is a man without food to keep him going? In that sense, Kino is no different from any of us.

Kino: What else do I eat? I go fishing and grill whatever I happen to catch. They're perfect in cold seasons like this, since they don't go bad. Once, I had them hanging off my motorrad along the way and almost got them stolen by birds. (Laughs)

She also tells us of the sense of solidarity she felt with both humans and nature along her travels.

Kino: Looking at the beautiful natural landscapes on the way, I find myself very glad that I left on my journey. But what made an even bigger impression on me were the other travellers I met on the road. They were all very kind to me. Seeing as I'm still rather young, they take care of me, asking me if I'm doing all right, or if I'm eating well. One person even shared some food with me, even though he didn't have very much himself.

Travellers greatly value their sense of camaraderie. As they are always so far from their own people, they show kindness and sympathy towards others in their position. If only the quarrelling people of our country could live by such a mentality.

When I finally asked her what she has planned for the future, Kino smiled brightly.

Kino: I'm going to keep travelling. But later, much, much later, I'm going to go back to my homeland and become a teacher. Then, I want to teach the children there, who might be struggling with what they want to do with their lives, by telling them about all the things I've seen on my travels. It's not that I want to send them travelling like me, but I want them to use that knowledge to help my homeland.

This reporter found himself certain--Kino will achieve her dream someday soon. There is no doubt.

Kino: Once I become a teacher, I'm going to show off to my students and tell them that I was once interviewed for a newspaper on my travels. (Laughs)

<=>

"Hello, Miss Kino. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview."

"Not a problem. ...But aren't you going to interview Hermes, too?"

"I'd first like to hear your opinions as a traveller, Miss Kino. You don't need to say anything, Mr. Hermes. Thank you."

"I understand. Stay quiet for now, Hermes."

"Fine. I don't really mind since they gave us all this stuff. I'm gonna go to sleep, so wake me up when you're done."

"Got it. Oh, you can start now. Considering everything you've given us, I'll do my best to answer as best I can."

"Thank you. But I'll take out the thing about the incentive we gave you from the article. Haha! We are a national paper, so I'll just write that you happened to agree to the interview on the fly."

"Of course."

"Great! Let's begin. Let me explain this again. You'll tell me genuine stories about your travels, and we'll publish it on our papers. It's truly unfortunate that you're leaving today, Miss Kino, or you could have read the article yourself..."

"There's no helping it. It's all right."

"Thank you for understanding. You see, the people in our country greatly admire travellers like yourself. We don't see them very often, so I'm sure you'll understand if we want to know about even the smallest of details."

"Should I answer honestly?"

"By all means! I'm sure they'll all want to know the reality of your travels. Everything you say will be published, I assure you. Of course, if there's anything you absolutely cannot answer, then please make your position clear. We will respect your privacy during this interview."

"Of course."

"Wonderful! Now, this might be a cliched question, but could you tell us a bit about how you began travelling? When did you start your journey? Why? Didn't your parents object at all?"

"Well, let's see... I lived in my homeland until I was twelve years old. I went to school every day and lived a normal life."

"Oh? So you left your home at the age of twelve?"

"That's right."

"At such a young age? I must admit, that is quite a surprise. Could you perhaps tell us why you decided to travel?"

"Huh... Well, in my homeland, when a child becomes twelve years old, they're given an operation to, well, turn them into adults."

"An operation? Is that a term used to refer to some sort of rite of passage?"

"Huh? No, I heard it was a surgical operation, where the child's head is cut open and the brain is altered. I learned that, through the operation, children would become 'proper adults' who could do even the worst of their work with a smile."

"I, I see..."

"Naturally, I thought that I'd also receive the operation to become an adult. But I began speaking to a traveller I met just before my operation, and began to question the tradition."

"I see! So that traveller inspired you to journey to other countries, then?"

"No. After speaking to him, I immediately ran to my parents and told them that I didn't want the operation. Then they told me that I was being foolish and got very angry at me."

"So you got a scolding. I suppose it takes a great deal of courage to reject tradition, no matter what country you're in."

"That's right. My parents began to call me a defective child who wouldn't obey her parents, and tried to kill me on the spot. The traveller I spoke about earlier protected me and was stabbed to death by my father."

"..."

"Just as I accepted dying at my father's hands just like the traveller, Hermes, who was on the ground--he was actually practically a piece of junk, but the traveller had fixed him up earlier--anyway, he suggested that I should run away. so I hurried on and escaped from my country on Hermes. So I guess you could say I never made the decision to leave my country... I was just trying to survive."

"... Um... Uh... That's... Well, I suppose that must have been a rather difficult choice... Um, so, is that how you began your travels?"

"Hm? Actually, no. afterwards I had no choice but to wander around. I collapsed of hunger in the forest and almost died. That's when I met someone I call "Master" and received her help. I lived with her for a while and learned all kinds of things, like how to shoot a persuader."

"O, of course. I suppose it must be thanks to her guidance that you could travel like this today."

"I guess so. Although she's the kind of person who'd shoot rubber bullets at me like no tomorrow as I slept."

"...So after that, you began your journey?"

"Not immediately, no. Although I was a little tempted to leave when I heard her stories about her travels when she was young."

"So I take it that something happened then to motivate you to leave?"

"Yes... I guess you could say that. It was after a certain incident that I really started thinking about travelling."

"Of course. And what might that have been?"

"Remember the traveller I talked about before? The man who died because of me? I happened to meet his mother."

"My goodness! What are the odds?"

"He essentially died because of me... so a part of me had always wanted to apologize, if I ever came across someone he knew."

"So what happened when you met her?"

"I told her about him, and she thanked me for telling her the story."

"I see. And so you left on your journey, moved by his mother's kindness?"

"No. Right after that, she poisoned me and tried to strangle me as I lay on the floor."

"Uh..."

"And I shot her to death."

"..."

"After I returned to Master, I was at a loss. But I kept listening to her stories about her travels, and I began to really want to go myself-"

"S, so you discussed the idea with her, then?"

"Not at all. I thought I might start second-guessing myself if she said I couldn't, so I just took Hermes and left. I took a lot of stuff from her house without permission, so she won't exactly be welcoming me with open arms."

"...O, of course. Thank you for telling us about how you started travelling. Um, next, I'd like to ask about your day-to-day life on the road..."

"Of course."

"What is your biggest concern when travelling between countries?"

"That would be food."

"Of course. Finding food must naturally be at the top of the list. What do you usually eat?"

"I generally eat portable rations on the road, but if I spot an edible animal I quickly shoot and clean it. Generally I eat rabbits or birds. Sometimes I run into deer in the woods, but they're usually too big for me to eat by myself, so I let them go. But fawn are perfect size-wise, and they're very tender. So when I find one I kill it and shoo the mother away."

"R... Right. I suppose you barbecue them, right?"

"That's right. Meat's always a great source of energy."

"Of course..."

"Cold seasons like this are perfect for eating meat, because they don't go bad. Sometimes I ride with a leg of venison or pork on Hermes. He doesn't really like it, though. Also, if I travel that way, I always have to be on the lookout for eagle attacks."

"I see... So, other than food, what are the biggest challenges you face on your journey?"

"Well... There are problems like rough roads, bad weather, not being able to shower for long periods of time, and like I mentioned earlier, food. But the biggest difficulty on my travels is--"

"Yes?"

"Living people."

"Pardon? ...Other people?"

"That's right."

"But I would think that other people you meet on the road might be a valuable source of stories and information."

"Yes, that's also true."

"Isn't there some sort of sense of camaraderie between travellers?"

"There is. But that only really applies to half of them. The other half is very dangerous. Some tried to rob me, do things to me, or... at any rate, they're violent people. Usually I can tell them apart by awkward movements or off-kilter laughter, so I'm always on my guard. Some of them realize that I'm on to them and give up, but not everyone's like that."

"So... in the event of an... attack, what do you do, Miss Kino?"

"I fight back."

"...And... uh, specifically?"

"If they're pointing a persuader at me, they tend to shoot right as they take aim. So I usually kill them."

"...You... k, kill them?"

"That's correct. It's very difficult to go easy on anyone when you're fighting with a persuader. Not only that, My [Cannon] is a large-caliber persuader that uses highly destructive rounds. Even a hit to the arm or leg causes a great deal of damage. Mostly it means death by blood loss."

"B, but... Isn't it... well, cruel to just shoot them on the spot...?"

"I'm afraid not, when my survival is on the line."

"O, of course... it must be very difficult for you... So, uh, might I ask why you earlier specified, 'living' people?"

"That's because dead people are absolutely harmless. Sometimes I come by corpses along the road. Some are travellers and others are not."

"Then I expect you wish them a peaceful rest and give them a burial?"

"No, that isn't necessary. The wild animals will clean them up anyway."

"..."

"When we come across a corpse, we travellers generally start by--"

"Yes?"

"We start by searching them for useful items."

"..."

"We leave them be if there's nothing of any use, but sometimes you can find things like jewelry, portable rations, weapons, ammunition, and other valuables."

"So you mean to say... that you take their belongings...?"

"That's right. Large objects are out of the question, of course, and I avoid distinctive items like rings in order to avoid misunderstandings. I don't want to be framed for murder, after all. There is the practice of searching a corpse's mouth for gold teeth, smashing the jaw to extract them, and selling the gold, but I personally don't want to go that far."

"..."

"Is it over yet, Kino?"

"It's finished."

"That went faster than I expected."



Chapter Two
“A Tale of Braggarts”
— Fantasy —

“A Tale of Braggarts” —Fantasy—

This story takes place in the dining hall of a hotel of a country.

The dining hall took up the first floor of the wooden building. The floors were paneled with wood, the walls likewise, and wide beams crossed the high ceiling.

Between each beam, as well as between the beam and the wall, hung thick ropes.

They were the kind you could find on sailing vessels. Tens dangled low enough to touch a person’s head.

About twenty round tables were arranged on the floor. Only one had chairs, and it was there where four travelers had gathered.

All of them just came into the country that day.

One was a man in his fifties, traveling by coach.

One was a woman in her thirties going around in a four-wheel drive.

One was a youth in his twenties who befriended the woman and got a ride, but otherwise went on foot.

The last was a short-haired teenager with a large revolver hung by the hip who rode a motorrad. (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only denotes that it doesn’t fly.)

After the four took their meals, they had their usual information exchange as they sipped tea. No other customers were present. Even the bartender was not at the back counter. And then,

"There're travelers here!"

The residents gathered round, talking loudly. All at once, some thirty people crowded around the surprised guests.

After exchanging simple greetings, one countryman said this.

"Say, travelers. When you guys say stuff like, 'These are the places I've seen up until now' and people don't believe you because they've got no way of checking the facts, you end up having to lie to satisfy them, right? So how about it? Tell us what kind of lies you make up when that happens. Something very imaginative, full of strange things that aren't possible in reality—we'd like to hear those."

This surprised the travelers, but if you were told that the meals would be free of charge if each one shared such a story, how could you keep quiet?

—

The old man spoke.

"This, I once saw. In one country, everybody was a tub of lard—so obese that you'd think they weren't human. Beauty and fat went hand-in-hand in their minds, I suppose, but anyhow, they pigged out every day. Obesity-related diseases manifested one after the other in them, but they didn't care one bit. And when they finally got to the point where they can't walk anymore, they were hailed as 'saints', taken care of by someone, and led a life wholly devoted to eating until death. Body weight always exceeded 300 kg. The sheer load causes the flesh to separate from the bone, so that's how they can't move. Such things can't be called human."

—

The woman spoke.

"The country that surprised me the most would have to be this one. Its custom was to lop off a baby's arm or leg once it was born. They considered having a full set of limbs too perfect and how 'it wasn't beautiful for a human' so they simply cut one off. They were even selling tools for that. Of course, that meant everyone there was missing an arm or a leg, and since it was their standard of beauty all this time, wherever I went, they always asked me with a frown, 'Aren't you ashamed to have all of your arms and legs?' And eventually they got this close to cutting something off of me, so I shot off."

—

The youth spoke.

“The one I went to was amazing. They had a law called the Middle Age Act. It says that if middle-aged people—adults who’ve developed their judgment—commit a crime, they’re innocent. As long as they agree to some simple reformation, they won’t be put in jail. It seems that their justification is this: ‘For such sensible adults to have committed the crime, they surely must have had no choice at the time. Hence, they cannot be charged with the crime.’ So there was a proverb like this in that country: ‘If you’re going to commit a crime, wait until middle age.’ Of course, most of the adults there were normal, but outrageous crimes cropped up every so often and gave me the creeps. I left pretty soon.”

—

The motorrad rider spoke.

“I once saw an entire land moving. It was about the size of this country we’re in, though beneath the huge walls were millions of caterpillars that never stopped moving. The people lived above them and traveled leisurely like that. When I got on, there was another country blocking its way, but the moving country used high-power lasers that burned through the walls like paper and reflected every missile that came its way, so it went on in a matter of minutes. Even now, I believe that country must be wandering somewhere.”

—

The stories were finished.

The stories highly amused the residents, whose eyes opened wide, laughed and exclaimed, "There's no way that could ever be real!"

So they thanked the travelers for the good time. 'We'll go pay the meal costs now, and the morning is nigh, so we'll be taking off,' they said.

Just like the way they came, they left in an instant.

The four sat there all alone. To break the sudden silence in the dining hall, the old man spoke.

"Everyone— You thought that thinking up of a lie was too much trouble, and ended up telling your real experiences in the places you visited, didn't you?"

The other three nodded. As they stared at the old man,

"Yeah. So did I."

He matter-of-factly confessed the same. And then,

"Although the places we spoke of earlier were shocking..."

The three nodded. Then all four looked up at the hanging ropes.

"This country is quite amazing itself."

And the three firmly nodded to the old man's murmur.

For the residents who had just been there were dangling upside-down from the ropes. All four continued staring up at the ropes.

—

At the bar counter, the bartender too hung upended from the rope tied to his knee.

“Would you like seconds?”

And asked this as he polished a glass.



Chapter Three
“Land of Protection”
— Meritocracy —

“Land of Protection” — Meritocracy —

One summer, there was a tiny car running on a prairie.

It was flat all around as far as the eye could see. The flowering plants danced comfortably with the wind, and there were but a few trees. The clouds scattered in the sky sparkled a bright orange from the glow of the evening sun.

The vehicle that made its way through this plain was a very tiny, yellow rundown car. One would think that its exhaust pipe, which spouted black fumes and rattled with each bump on the rough road, could fall off at any moment. Through its cracked side mirror, the rust-colored and fragmented corners of the car's hood could be seen.

Nevertheless, the car ran with all its might through the enormous grassland.

As it was summer, the air was warm in itself. But the climate in these parts was not humid, so crossing this place was not a grueling task. The man seated in the driver's seat, as well as the woman in the left-hand passenger seat enjoyed the gentle wind coming in through the window, their shirt collars swaying with the breeze.

While keeping one hand on the steering wheel, the slightly short but handsome young man in the driver's seat spoke to the woman beside him, “Master, don't you want to rest? Once we get to the country, that is.”

The woman with long black hair, the one who the man referred to as Master, returned a question without looking back at the man.

“And what do you mean by ‘rest’?”

“Why, just as it says on the tin. We’ll take a break from work and spend our time in the country relaxing. With that gem we got from the trader, we don’t have to worry about food expenses for a while.”

The woman did not say anything, but did not seem to be against the idea either.

“I would also like to savor three delicious meals a day for once.”

At the same time as the man’s words, the walls appeared from the bottom of the horizon.

The car feebly made its way to the walls. On both sides of the road, they could see something moving.

The man slowed down the car. The things that stirred in the meadows were animals.

It was around sixty centimeters in length. At a glance, it seemed to be a penguin, having the appearance of a bird that walks, but it had two arms like that of a monkey.

Its color was a mottled brown and cream, with fur like that of a cat and tail like that of a dog. Its face resembled a tiny bear, with its nose right in between its beady eyes.

"Oh, it's my first time seeing something like that," the man said. The woman remained silent, but poked her head out of the car and looked at the animal.

While being watched by around thirty such creatures, the car disappeared beyond the gates.

—

The place the two arrived in was neither big nor small. Its main industry was agriculture, and as it has no nearby enemies, it was a rather laid-back country.

Upon entering the country, the pair sold the gem and checked-in at a splendid hotel. After taking a long-awaited shower, they ate delicious food and spent their time relaxing.

The next day, while they were having their late breakfast in a sparsely occupied restaurant, an animal came in.

It was the same kind of animal that they saw outside the country. However, its color was slightly different; it was a mottled black and brown and had a more striking appearance.

This creature walked in brisk, small steps with its two legs. It approached the table where the two travelers were having their meal.

"So they can also be found inside the country. I wonder if it's a pet?" the man asked.

"I don't know," the woman answered without much interest while she drank her tea.

The animal came up to the side of the man and hopped up. It landed on the table with its feet, then fixed its glittering gaze on the cream-filled pastry that the man picked up to eat.

“No, you don’t dare.” The man raised his right hand to drive it away when,

“Ah! Stop, traveler!”

The man suddenly stopped his hand on the waiter’s shout. The woman, her lips still on her cup, lifted her gaze.

And at that moment,

“Kyokyokyokyukyo”

The animal uttered these sounds, then jumped away after nimbly grabbing the pastry from the man’s hand. It started to eat the pastry, smearing its face with cream.

“Ah!”

It gobbled up the pastry while the man held his mouth open in disbelief. The waiter ran quickly towards them.

“Traveler, you mustn’t lay a finger on that animal.”

“Why?”

“Because we have a law that protects it.”

The waiter explained that this animal used to thrive in these areas. However, when people started to live in this country, its population dropped due to excessive hunting.

And just before it became extinct, the country passed a law to protect it. They gave it food, and soon its population grew.

To prevent its extinction, a law was passed forbidding everyone, without exception, from harming it. And so, no matter what it did, the people had no excuse to hurt it.

Even during the explanation, the animal indulged itself with the man's share of the pastries, and at last when it has finished eating up everything,

“Kyokyakyakyukyukyukya?”

It opened its cream-smudged mouth and vocalized what seemed like a question. The man and the waiter remained mute, having no idea what it was trying to say.

The animal then looked at the woman's plate. There was one more delicious-looking pastry left in it.

“Kyokyukyakyukyoo. Kyukyukyo”

The animal yammered, and stretched its hand towards the plate.

“Kyukya?”

Just before it snatched the pastry, it met gazes with the woman who was staring it down.

“Kyuki-...”

The animal averted its eyes.

And then it jumped off and ran to a different table at the other side of the room. It also climbed up and started to wolf down a barely-eaten pancake of one customer.

The middle-aged man let out a deep sigh, and stood up from his seat. He abandoned his half-eaten meal, and went out of the restaurant.

“It’s just as you see. In this country, you can’t hurt this animal. If you wounded this animal by chance, you will have to serve five years in jail, even if you are a traveler. If you killed it, you will have to face a life sentence. Be careful.”

“Wow.”

The man was in shock. And as he was not able to taste the pastry, he ordered one more from the waiter. However,

“I’m very sorry, but it’s sold out.”

The waiter bowed and left.

When the man saw the woman eating her share of the pastry,

“Can I have half, please?”

“No.”

The woman replied coldly.

—

After that, the pair came out for a stroll and looked around the country.

"Anyway, that's one menace of an animal."

Just as the man said, the animals all over the place behaved outrageously as if there was no one around.

One group crossed the street, causing the cars and carriages to stop. Another skillfully climbed a wall and threw away the hung laundry. Some ate and laid waste to the fruits in front of a store. And some left footprints on a table that was just cleaned. They scattered droppings just about everywhere, destroyed crops, and played with those that cannot be eaten.

There weren't really much of them, but they're not particularly rare, as they could be seen just about everywhere.

According to the citizens, perhaps because of recent success in breeding, their numbers have suddenly increased.

And then a few animals came and flocked around the strolling pair. However,

"Do you need something?"

The group left as soon as they met eyes with the woman. Then they set their sights on a girl walking on the other side of the street. They snatched the little girl's bag and chucked it in the middle of the road. A truck passed and ran over it.

"How terrible... After being able to buy it at last..."

Seeing the flattened bag, the girl cried in anguish.

"Kyukyakyaakyukyo!" "Kyu-kyokyu!" "Kyakyukyokya!"

The animals cried out, as if they were laughing in glee.

"They choose their opponents wisely. Pretty smart, eh," the man said.

—

That evening.

As the two relaxed in the hotel's lobby, the middle-aged man who managed the hotel came to greet them. He gave a warm welcome to the travelers, who rarely come to their country, and served them some tea.

When the travelers told him that they planned to leave the next morning,

"This is a good country, so please come again," he invited.

The woman talked about a traveler who once stayed in the hotel. It was a story from a long time ago, when this magnificent building was yet to be built. The owner pointed to a picture hanging from a very high place in the lobby.

It was an old-looking, black and white picture showing a young couple smiling brightly in front of a small building. The owner explained that it was a photo of his parents.

Several decades ago, his parents built a small inn in this country, and it has since then become a magnificent hotel. It was evident that he was very proud of it.

"That's the only picture I have of them. It's this hotel's treasure."

"I see it's very important to you," the woman said.

"Yes. That's why I placed it in such a high place. I would really like to display it on top of the fireplace where it could be seen very well, but the circumstances in this country is not so favorable for that, you see," the owner said with an intricate expression.

—

The next morning,

An incident occurred while the travelers were having their breakfast.

"Ah! Stop! Stop it!"

A man's scream was heard from the lobby.

The male traveler raised his eyebrow, and several guests went to the lobby out of worry.

"That's the owner wasn't it?" the woman said, and stood as she wiped her mouth. The man also hurried to the lobby.

What they saw there was,

"Stop!"

The screaming owner, and

"Kyakyu!" "Kyakyakyu!" "Kyakyuukyukyokya"

Three creatures that were happily stomping on something.

"Kyukya!"

"Kyukyukyo!"

"Kyu-kyukyukyu!"

What the animals continued to stomp on, while they grunted as if conversing with each other, was the photo of the owner's parents, which should have been hanging from a high place.

The animals trampled on the picture frame, and as if that was not enough, they stepped on the picture and dirtied it with their drool and droppings.

"..."

The owner sank down to the floor right in front of them, and could only stare at the treasured picture that has turned into a sloppy mess.

"How come?"

The man tilted his head and looked at the wall where the picture hung. Then he noticed three long poles leaning against it.

"Oh dear..."

The female workers in the lobby told them that the animals came carrying those poles, propped them against the wall to climb up, and dropped the picture.

"Kya-kyukyaa!" "Kyukyokyyuu!" "Kya!"

While the animals happily wrecked the photo,

"Ah..."

The guests could only look on silently at the owner who knelt before the scene as his eyes became flooded with tears.

"Kyakya?"

One of the animals trotted with its dirty feet to the guests, who drew back. They were grinding their teeth in frustration, but no one had the nerve to lay their hands on it.

"This country's kings, huh?" the man muttered.

Soon this animal scampered in front of the woman. But it did not approach any more than necessary.

"Kya-kyakyu!"

It voiced out, and jumped up several times before returning to its fellow creatures still standing on the picture.

"Kyakyuu!" "Kyakyu!" "Kyaakyukya!"

The picture, which had no hope of getting mended, was further shred to pieces with the animals' feet. The animals danced around as if in celebration.

And at that moment.

Bam.

A staggering roar shook the lobby.

All humans present except for one almost jumped in surprise. Likewise, all animals save for one almost jumped in surprise.

The lone person was the woman who had her smoking revolver poised by her waist.

And the lone animal was the one who received the bullet in its chest, blown away by a few meters, and collapsed with its face up. Blood spurted from its wound, and it has stopped moving except for a faint twitch. It was the animal that, only moments ago, mocked the woman.

"And here we go."

The man mumbled to himself as he took out a slim automatic hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) with his left hand.

"Kyakyu?"

He switched on the laser sight, and the tiny circle of red light settled right in between its eyes.

Bang.

The animal flopped face up along with the firing sound that was much quieter than the first one.

Right before the dumbfounded guests and the only remaining animal.

"I'm sorry. My persuader fired by accident," was the woman's only explanation. The man also holstered his persuader and,

"Mine too. Oh, I'm really glad no one got hit."

"T-travelers... This is...outrageous..."

At last one of the guests was finally able to say something.

"What are you talking about?"

"W-what... You just killed an animal protected under our laws... That's a felony..."

"Animal?" The woman tilted her head innocently, and fixed her gaze at the two dead animals and the remaining animal frozen in shock. "Where is this animal you speak of?" she asked without hesitation.

A wave of comprehension swept the crowd.

“Where is this animal you speak of?”

She asked one more time.

“Yes, indeed...”

The owner stood up unsteadily.

“Kyu?”

“Everyone here... There’s not a single animal here, is there?”

“Kyukikyo...”

The owner wiped off the tears as he stood up, and lifted a chair by his side.

“DIE!”

And hit the remaining animal with all his strength.

“Kya—”

There was a tiny shriek, and the unpleasant sound of several bones breaking.

—

For a while, the owner continued to cry in front of the ruined picture.

“Oh my.”

The humans around gazed at the pair of travelers. The woman remained silent while the man only shrugged his shoulders.

Things like “What should we do?” or “Should we call the police?” could be heard among the crowd, but no one took initiative.

When the lobby has quietened down like a funeral service,

“Kyakyu?”

The door opened with a thud. Dozens of the animals entered the lobby. And upon seeing the corpses of their fellows,

“Kyakyu!” “Kyakyuu!” “Kyokyu!” “Kyaakyukyukyu!” “Kyakyu!”

They shouted out unanimously, and plunged themselves towards the humans.

Bam. Boom. Crack. Bang.

The pair of travelers pounded away like precision machinery. When the woman changed her magazine, the man would cover for her. And she would do the same when the man ran out of bullets.

The lobby was soon filled with sounds of explosions. After all the noise has subsided, there was not a single animal left moving.

The woman once again addressed the speechless crowd, “Where are the animals?”

"T-that's right!" someone shouted. It was as if a switch was turned on.

"We have to protect the animals, but there's not one of them here!"

"Yes, yes! — There are no such animals in this country!"

"And there's no need to protect something that is not here!"

And everyone raised a cheer.

—

That day, the country experienced a day of celebration noisier than any they've had before.

"Have you seen any animals?"

"No, I haven't."

Such dialogue propagated like a wave throughout the country from the drop that originated in the hotel.

The citizens picked up bludgeons and farming tools.

"Kyakyuu!" "Gyokyu—"

And beat to death every single animal they could find.

At first the police considered doing something about it, but eventually, all of the citizens started doing the same thing, and they were forced to choose between arresting every single person in sight, or turn a blind eye to what they were doing.

"There aren't any animals here...right, officer?"

"Yeah...there's not one, inspector."

And such was their choice.

"Kyukyukyaa-!"

The whole day, angry bawls and shrieks were heard throughout the country.

The travelers also took part with their recurrent accidental firings that hit 'nothing'. And when they ran out of bullets, the stores gave them more for free.

—

And soon it was evening.

After being sent off with words of gratitude, the small, yellow car ran towards the gates.

There, the guard thanked them and invited them to come again. And the moment the car started to pass through the open gates,

"Kyakyuu!"

An animal hiding in the bushes jumped on the roof of the car.

"Ah! That basta — I don't see anything!" the guard exclaimed and considered thrusting his sword to the top of the car. However,

“We’re leaving, so it’s okay,” the woman spoke, making the guard stop. At that moment, the car passed out of the gates.

“Well, since you’re out of the country now... Please take care,” the guard said before he returned to the gates.

“Master?”

The man in the driver’s seat set his gaze on the animal clinging desperately, and perhaps trembling in fear, at the roof,

“Kyukyukyu...”

The woman asked the man to drive for a while, and as told, he rode the tiny car into the prairie. Then they stopped.

The woman alighted from the car and talked to the animal on top of the roof.

“Please get off.”

“Kyu-kyakyuu!”

“We can’t take you with us.”

“Kyukyuku?”

“No.”

With the woman’s glare, the creature reluctantly jumped off the car’s roof.

“Kyukyuu...”

"It seems that you've misunderstood things a little."

"Kyu?"

"'Protection' does not equate to 'power'. The ones who have real control in that country were its people, not you."

"Kyu..."

"Now, go wherever you like."

The woman pointed her finger to the prairie. The animal looked in that direction.

And over there, he saw many other animals. A group of around twenty animals of various sizes put out their heads from the grasses and looked back at them. It was the same kind, with only the color and size being slightly different.

"Kyu-kyukyu..."

"Goodbye," the woman said and boarded the car and asked the driver to depart.

"Bye-bye," the man said, before launching the sluggish car.

—

As they rode through the prairie road,

"I see you have a kind side too, Master. I thought you were going to kill it immediately like before."

"No and no."

Having heard the word 'no' twice, the man tilted his head in confusion.

"Master?"

He looked at the woman who sat on the left-hand seat. The woman was smiling.

"I'm not kind at all. And there was no need for me to kill it immediately."

—

When the yellow car has left under the evening sun,

"Kyu-kyukyuu!"

The animal that was left behind looked at the group of animals.

"Gogagagagogaa" "Gogagagagago" "Gogogogogaga" "Gogagagogaga!"

They communicated with domineering tones, and the lone creature replied,

"Kyoyu..."

And slightly drew back.

Then the one that seemed to be the boss of the group addressed it,

“Kyokyukyo?”

“Kyokyu-! Kyokyukyo-kyokyu!”

“Kyo-. Kyokyukyokyukyo”

Having said such, the boss turned back to its group.

“Gogagogogago!”

And spoke with a short yet mighty-sounding tone. Its peers tensed.

And then the boss,

“Kyokyukyo”

Spoke to the creature gently. It waved its hand, and invited it to come.

“Kyu! Kyuu—”

It replied happily, and approached the group. The group spread out and ushered in the newcomer.

And then,

“Gogagoo-!”

Within a moment, the boss began to beat up the lone creature together with everyone.

“Kyaakyuu! Kyakyuukyakyuu!”

The shrieks got louder, but they continued to beat it down without paying heed.

And soon, silence returned to the prairie.

Chapter Four

“Land of Electric Poles”

— Transmission —



“Land of Electric Poles” —Transmission—

Kino and Hermes were in a country.

Anywhere you were, you could see the border walls in the small, flat place. It was another one of those places with an alternating layout of houses and fields—a carefree scenery of a country just as carefree.

So that was how Kino was, cruising the place on Hermes under the warm sunlight when—

“Say, traveler. Would you like to have some tea and snacks with my family?”

She had no reason to refuse the passerby, so Kino let herself be treated.

Kino followed the countryman as she pushed Hermes along. She turned to enter the house grounds from the wide gravel road when—

“Oh, watch out there.”

He warned her. She stopped in her tracks and looked ahead, where a thick wire lay, stretching into the house.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Power lines,” he responded, “to connect the houses together. If you touch it, you get electrocuted and may die, so one must always be careful.”

“My, that’s serious.”

“But as long as you’re careful, you’re fine. Look at the end there.”

Kino and Hermes followed the line until it terminated at a pillar. It was very tall and pointed at the tip. They went the other way and sure enough, there was a pillar there, too, set in a very firm foundation made of stone.

“Huh—that’s true, you see these near lots of houses,” Hermes commented.

Then Kino asked what they were.

“Electric poles,” the countryman replied.

“Electric poles?”

“Yes, that’s right. Actually, a traveler like you came here many years ago and passed on the knowledge to us. Just like I did now, I cautioned her about the wires in the ground, but then she said, ‘Then just set up an electric pole between the wires.’ That was a brilliant idea. So we erected them up right away. Now whenever you see an electric pole, you know where the power lines are. No more need to look at the ground; ‘Oh, there’s an electric pole, so there must be power lines.’ The number of people electrocuted dropped down drastically.”

A few days after Kino and Hermes left.

“Ack...oh, no!” the countryman exclaimed. His neighbors asked him, ‘What’s wrong, what’s the matter?’

“We loathe the birds that eat the biting lice—our religious figure. So we couldn’t hang the electric wires up in the air because the birds will perch on them. And since we cannot put the wires underground because it is forbidden by law to dig in any place other than the farmland, we have no choice but to place them on top of the ground!” “Sure. What’s the big deal?”

“I forgot to say that! To the traveler and motorrad who were here days ago! They probably think we’re idiots, now! Absolute nincompoops!”

“Well, that’s not a problem. Travelers are travelers. They might come back again, but the chance of them not coming again is very high.”

“And I’m telling you, we lost the chance to correct that! What if they go to other countries and tell them about us? What if they all start thinking how stupid we must be?”

“Like I said, don’t worry about it. We don’t know everything about that traveler either, let alone other countries.”

“That’s...true, but...”

“No worries, no worries. Now, it’s time for prayer. —O sacred, sacred biting louse, bless us with your gift.”



“In a Place Like This” — Preface —

Hey, Kino. Is there really a country here?”

Hermes asked Kino this while he ran.

“Dunno...”

She cocked her head as she replied.

Kino and Hermes were in a desert. The hard-packed white earth stretched from horizon to horizon, as far as the eye could see.

Clouds covered the sky without fail; a single white sheet. A white sky and a white earth. The farther you looked, the blurrier the distinction between the two. In such a blank world stood a lone motorrad.

Kino wore her yellow goggles and a bandana was wrapped around her face. She also had a long, brown coat on, with the excess of the long hem rolled up to her thighs.

“Whaddya mean, Miss Dunno?”

“Actually, I don’t even know why I’m even driving here. It’s strange.”

“I knew it. Well, it’s camel flag around here, I guess.”

“...I think you mean camouflage.”

"Yeah, that's it! —Nice work."

"Uhm, but... What is this 'camouflage' for?"

"If we go along further, we'll figure it out."

As Hermes said these things and made Kino tip her head again, she drove along. The scenery hardly changed, so it became even more doubtful whether they were moving at all. When some time passed in this manner,

"Ah..."

This was what Kino found.

It was a very big sign. Half-buried and slanting in the white desert. There were huge letters inscribed on it—

Kino stopped Hermes before the sign. She let down the kickstand and got off, wobbling over to it,

"Uuugh..."

And at length sunk down to her knees. On the sign was written thus:

"The afterword of Volume X begins here, so best regards."

'How can this be?' Kino muttered as she beat her gloved fists into the white desert.

"So this was an afterword! —dammit, that blasted author did it after all!"

So Hermes yelled enjoyably for and behind Kino. And then it whispered quietly.

“An afterword all of a sudden in the book—it’s within the expectations of many readers, though. This is just one of them.”

“Not only in the last volume but this one, too—how can he do this to a character?!”

Kino became angry, but we’ll ignore that as the afterword begins.

—

Okay, so, the afterword.

As usual, no spoilers. Reading this before the subsequent stories in this book is fine, too.

So now Kino’s gone up to X.

“Volume 10” is just one word, but since the year 2000 when the first volume went on sale, six years have passed. So if you’ve been reading since you were in sixth grade, you’re a high school senior, now. Amazing. As for me, it’s been a plentiful six years of experience and growth, I believe.

In all that time, Kino got a drama CD, an anime, video game, a signing at Entama, an anime movie in theaters, a speech on that stage, a signing in Taiwan, a second game—lots happened.

That a manuscript initially entered into the Dengeki Game Novel Prize came this far is because of the support of all of you, readers.

I am grateful once again as I reach this turning point of a tenth volume. Thank you.

However...I must deliver some very disheartening news.

I've started to run out of material for the Kino series.

I've been doing my best writing this far, but...I can't go on any longer.

I can't think of any more...

Interesting afterwords!

October 2006

Keiichi Sigsawa, the Afterword Author Who Dreams of the Future

P. S. I'll try my best.



Chapter Six

“Ti’s Day”

— a Day in the Girl’s Life —

“Ti’s Day” —a Day in the Girl’s Life—

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, white shaggy fur. My face makes me look like I’m always happy and smiling, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

— —

“I’ll leave everything to you then.”

Master Shizu set out early that morning, even before the sun has risen. Because the country we have come to this time was rather unstable and the public order pretty bad, he has given up on immigration. However, Master Shizu decided to accept a high-paying job for our traveling expenses. I did not ask him any details about this job, but seeing that he brought his well-maintained katana with him, it’s probably nothing decent. I did not pry.

But more than that, the problem is the white-haired girl who lay face down on the bed even at this hour—Tifana or Ti. During our crossing to this continent, we were caught in various circumstances, and she has become our traveling companion as a result.

“I’m counting on you.”

So Master Shizu said, but to tell the truth, I was not too keen on this task.

For the whole day, it will only be Ti and me. Master Shizu is the one who is good in communicating with her. Surely I’m not expected to talk to her?

—

We were inside a room of a cheap hotel, an old decrepit building built in a place quite far from town.

The wallpaper of the room was peeled off all over the place and it was full of cobwebs when we entered it yesterday. The mattresses of the two beds even had holes in them. Right now Ti was sleeping on her own sleeping bag placed on top of a blanket that can’t be considered clean by any standard. Her usual grey short pants revealed her stick-thin legs, and on top she was wearing a light brown, long-sleeved round-necked shirt. Even though she has other clothes, this is all she ever wears in her sleeping and waking hours, as long as the temperature would allow it.

It was already late in the morning, halfway till noontime. If only she slept like this until evening, I would have nothing to worry about. But the moment it entered my mind, Ti woke up.

“ ... ”

As quiet as ever, she raised her body as if she was doing a push-up. She stuck her upper body ten centimeters out of the sleeping bag. Then, like a fort’s cannon, slowly turned her white head towards the right. That is, towards me, who lay comfortably beside the bed.

Whether she was only sleepy or passing on me her usual silent judgment, her emerald green eyes stared at me for four seconds.

“ ... ”

I rose up and sat beside the bed, then gazed firmly at Ti.

“Good morning.”

“ ... ”

“Um, Master Shizu’s out to earn some money. If all goes as planned, he will be back late this night. So you will be spending the whole day with me.”

“ ... ”

“You understand, don’t you? —Gah!”

I was hugged tightly by a Ti charging straight from the bed, and was knocked down to the left. Heavy...

Then she shook my body before abruptly releasing it after a few seconds.

I tried to ask her what that was all about, but since she probably wouldn’t answer anyway, I decided to forget about it. When I glanced up, she was looking at me. Then she spoke with a tiny voice.

“G’ning.”

And disappeared into the washroom.

It was only after several seconds that I realized that she was telling me ‘Good morning’.

—

Master Shizu left beforehand the croissant he bought last night, as well as a brand new bottle of marmalade.

Ti began eating these for breakfast and lunch. But I was flustered when I saw her scooping out a large portion of the orange marmalade with a big spoon.

It’s not a good idea to eat that much all at once. When I said so, Ti looked at the super large serving of marmalade and asked,

“Poison?”

I didn’t mean to put it that way.

—

Upon opening the curtains, the clear weather greeted us from outside the window. The early summer morning brought warmth upon the world.

From the window, we could see the geometric patterns formed by the ridges of the cultivated fields, in which grew carrots and whatnot. Visible beyond the scarecrows swaying with the wind was the sideways stretch of grey walls.

Ti leaned on a chair.

“ ... ”

And continued to stare at the scenery for a long time. Meanwhile, I lay comfortably on top of the carpet beside her.

As the window was facing north, the sun’s rays were not too intense. Time flowed quietly like this, with no one speaking. And soon it was well past noon.

It would be nice if this day passed peacefully like this. But the moment the thought entered my mind, Ti suddenly got up.

“Going out.”

If only the thought did not occur to me.

—

“You can leave that behind, Ti.”

There’s no need to carry around a grenade with you on a stroll.

“ ... ”

After staring at me for a while, she reluctantly returned the five grenades from her shoulder bag back to Master Shizu’s bag. I don’t know about casually leaving a grenade in her clothes pocket, but I guess it wouldn’t accidentally explode since she wound a tape around the lever. I thought it would be a good idea to do something about Ti’s attachment to grenades, but Master Shizu doesn’t really pay it any mind.

I proposed that she bring a bottle of water with her. Ti obediently followed, filling a plastic flask with water. She wrapped it in a towel and put it inside the bag.

And finally Ti slung the bag on her shoulder. Clutching the key bearing Master Shizu’s memo: ‘Don’t forget when you go out,’ she approached the door.

When I followed her from behind, I noticed a very faint scent of oil from the bag.

“Ti, what did you put at the bottom of your bag?”

Ti took out a metal baton-like object.

“You can also leave that behind,” I said.

There’s no need to take a ballistic knife with you on a stroll.

—

“...”

“Little lady, I won’t understand you if you just stare. What do you need?”

Having grown tired of Ti’s stare, the middle-aged man seated in a tall chair behind the front desk who first looked back to us with a start from his magazine reading, asked. From behind, I told Ti that she had to hand over the key since we’re going out.

“ ... ”

Without a word, she put the key on top of the table with a clunk.

“Ah, going for a walk, eh? Have a good time.”

“ ... ”

But even after that, Ti continued to stare. And stared some more.

“Is there something else?” The man asked, again becoming impatient of the long silence. This time, Ti answered.

“Stroll.”

“... I know that already.”

—

Just as expected, there was nothing but fields outside. From time to time, trucks passed on the paved road that was full of cracks. Both sides of the road were lined up with fields. And until the walls there was nothing but fields.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“ ... ”

Silently, Ti headed to the direction of the walls, walking on the road headed northeast with the sun at her back. As she proceeded speedily, I followed.

When the road turned slightly to the right, it became clear that we have no particular destination, just as I suspected.

“The end.”

Ti said all of a sudden, and stopped on her tracks. When I asked ‘Of what?’ Ti gazed at her feet and tapped the ground with the tip of her shoes several times. Eventually, Ti’s shadow fell on the side of the road, on the grass-filled slopes of the fields, and became blurry and indistinguishable.

“Are you by any chance stomping on your own shadow?” I asked, and Ti looked at me and nodded.

“Shadow. Dark.”

“Well, that’s true, but...”

“Gone.”

“I can see that...”

“But it’s okay.”

“Ah, is that so...?”

“It’s okay now.”

“ ... ”

“It’s okay.”

I don’t get it.

—

Ti turned back and retraced our steps, and walked beyond the hotel entrance.

The fields continued for a while up to the end of the road, and soon houses began to appear one after another. At the end of it, that is at the circular center of the country, a random ensemble of tower-like buildings could be seen rising above the urban area, which to my knowledge, has a rather bad public order.

We’d better not go that way. When I told her this,

“ ... ”

Still quiet, Ti sat down on an old, neglected bench by the roadside. It probably used to be a bus stop. Only the round, concrete base of the signboard remained intact.

As Ti seated herself, I also settled by her side. The urban area was right before us. From time to time, Ti would take a gulp of water from her flask, and would also allow me to have a sip.

And until the evening rays of the sun dyed the sky, she patiently sat and gazed at the town. I don’t know what she finds enjoyable in it, but she just continued to look ahead.

And when the sun was almost invisible beyond the walls, and the moment the sky became dim, a light shone upon the group of buildings, illuminating them all at once. It was different from the glows that leaked one by one from the tiny windows. The buildings were floodlit by an intense light that seems to be advertising their existence. It’s probably some huge kind of spotlight.

A group of brightly lit buildings—I have no idea at all how she knew about this, and just when I thought how strange the country was,

“ ... ”

Ti stood up and began walking towards the hotel. It’s about time for us to go home. I was finally relieved that our little walk culminated with no trouble. Ti, who was quite talkative today, mumbled once more.

“Different.”

Again, I don’t get it.

—

We got back into the hotel before it became dark.

“Here you go.”

We received our key back and returned to our room. On another note, there were no other customers besides us. Just when I was worrying how this hotel could keep up their business, I noticed the agricultural calendar on the wall and noted that people could be staying here during the busy farming season.

Dinner was croissant and marmalade again. Ti smeared plenty of marmalade on top of the halved croissant.

“ ... ”

And silently handed it to me. While I was overcome with confusion, the marmalade began to drip.

“Oops!”

I caught it in the air, accepted the croissant and started to chew on it.

“Thank you.”

I thanked her, and Ti looked down at me, not showing a smile.

“Friend?”

“What? —Um, I guess so. Even if Master Shizu’s not here at the moment, we’re all traveling buddies.”

“Good.”

“Yes.”

“No problem.”

“Yes...?”

This day is filled with things I don’t understand.

—

Late that night, Master Shizu returned in the buggy. Just like that morning, Ti was already asleep, lying face down on her bed.

I welcomed the rather worn-out Master Shizu. He came into the room with both arms around a box about thirty centimeters wide and one meter long. Its lid was tied with a string.

Master Shizu quietly laid the box on the floor. When I asked him what’s in it, Master Shizu, now seated on a chair, answered somewhat awkwardly.

“That’s my reward for today’s work.”

Reward? Master Shizu confirmed that Ti was asleep,

“I was asked by this country’s police to assist in obliterating a crime organization’s hideout. I was supposed to get money in return, but things suddenly changed when it’s over. I ended up being given some of the supplies that was confiscated from the hideout. Just as they say, problems exist in the police force of a country with problems.”

“I see. So what did they give you?”

“It’s...something that would probably be useful to us. There was nothing else but this.”

Master Shizu opened the lid of the box. Inside,

“What is this?”

It was more or less seventy centimeters in length. At a glance, one could tell that it was a persuader (Note: A gun). It has a stock that goes on top of the shoulders, a trigger, and an oddly thick barrel.

“It’s a ‘grenade launcher’.”

“A persuader?”

“Kind of. Because it has a thick barrel, it’s used exclusively for shooting out grenades.”

“... And will you be using that, Master Shizu?”

“No, I thought maybe I could give it to Ti. It seems she liked grenades a lot, but she’s not too good at throwing them.”

“ ... ”

“Better than nothing, right?”

—

Master Shizu ate what was left of the croissant, and after taking a breather,

“How’s today?”

First I answered that we were safe, and that Ti talked more than usual, then I told him about the stuff that I did not understand.

“...Heh,” Master Shizu looked surprised. “That’s interesting. — It’s the first time for the two of you to be alone together for a whole day, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And so Ti probably thought she had to behave herself.”

“Really? —Well, indeed I may not have seemed too reliable because I am a dog...”

“I am very well aware of how dependable you are, Riku. But maybe Ti did not know that. —It just amuses me how she tried to demonstrate leadership between the two of you.”

“Well, it’s not like I wasn’t happy that she sees me as part of the team.”

“What do you mean?”

“I almost begged Kino to kill Ti in order to save you, Master Shizu.”

“Don’t dwell on it. We have avoided the worst.”

“I doubted that Ti considered someone like me a friend.”

“I think she does. I believe Ti thinks about a lot of things more than we think she does.”

“Really...? I’m afraid to say I don’t quite understand.”

“For instance, I think there might be some meaning behind her strange actions today.”

“Oh... How so?”

“First, as soon as I heard you say that she stomped on her shadow until it was gone, I thought Ti was trying to recognize anew the fact that those people in black that she lived with back in that country were gone. And that she stays strong in spite of it. That she’s ‘okay’.”

“Isn’t that a bit...far-fetched?”

“Maybe, but then there was that group of buildings at the country center. While observing them, Ti thought that those buildings at the center were like the Tower. But when they were lit up, she realized that they are ‘different’ from the Tower she knew, which always remained dark.”

“ ... ”

“And during dinner... Wasn’t that Ti’s way of sharing her food with a friend? That makes me believe that you and Ti got along really well today.”

“ ... ”

I didn’t say anything and kept silent, just like Ti.

“But maybe I was just overthinking things.”

Master Shizu said with a shrug of his shoulders and laughed.

—

The next morning.

We were in the buggy outside the walls.

The weather was good. A green meadow spanned the entire surface ahead of the perfectly straight road.

“Shall we go then?” Master Shizu said in the driver’s seat while fixing his goggles.

“Yup,” Ti said on passenger seat as she stroked my head.

“Let’s go,” I said while settled between Ti’s legs and my head being stroked.

Then Ti embraced my head and spoke as she rubbed her cheeks on it.

“Yup. Let’s go together. Riku’s a friend.”

— —

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

My face makes me look as if I’m always happy and smiling. But it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

But right now, I am happy and smiling.

Shizu is my Master. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and had been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Another fellow traveler is Ti, a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, and who has become part of the team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

The buggy took off.

That morning.

The boy woke up, pushed aside his thin, ragged blanket, and stretched his arms.

He slapped his cheeks to wake himself in the tiny, messy, and empty room.

"All right! Better do my best today, too!" He said energetically.

That morning.

The girl quietly opened her eyes and sat up in her veiled bed.

She folded her hands over her chest in the big, clean room.

"Please let me continue singing cheerfully today..." She uttered in prayer.

That morning.

The traveler arrived at the country on her motorrad.

Her fists were trembling as she stood at the square before the gate that early morning.

"I want to sleep in a bed with clean sheets!" She yelled.

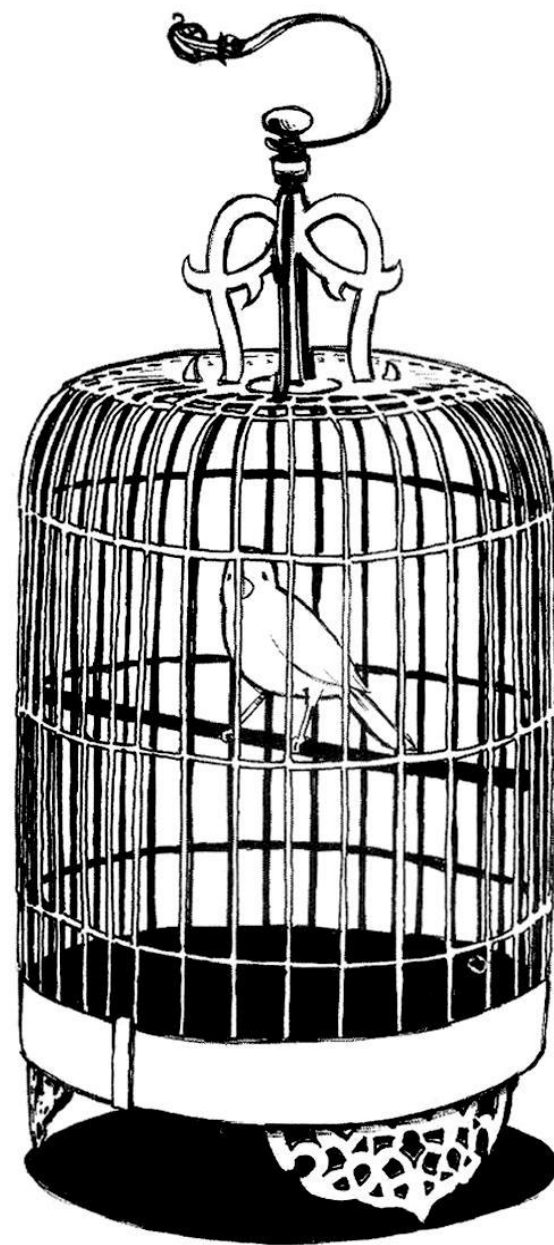
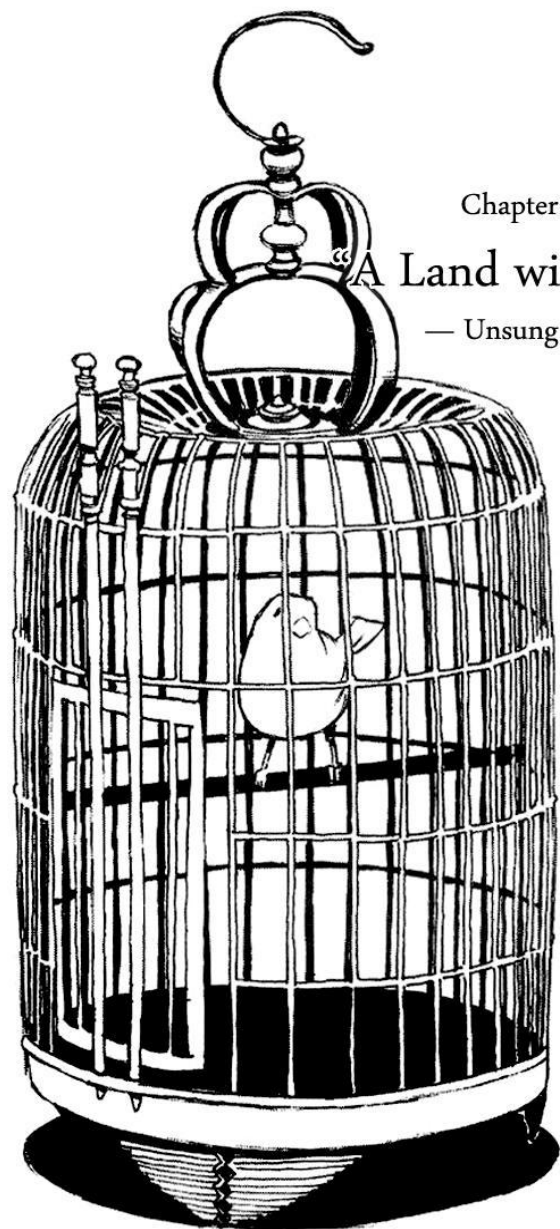
"Of all the first words to say when you enter a new country. And so early in the morning, too!" The motorrad grumbled. "We have important things to do."

"Oh. Right..."

Chapter Seven

“A Land with a Diva”

— Unsung Divas —



“A Land with a Diva” — Unsung Divas—

There was once a country with a forest dyed by the autumn colors.

The woods stretched from inside the land all the way to the outside, burning in bright reds and yellows as the trees prepared for winter.

High white walls encircled the country at a gentle arc--it was so large that it was impossible to see the wall on the other side from one end.

The forest stretched all the way to the mountain in the distance.

Other than the forest, inside the country there were brown fields, a blue lake, and grey villages and suburbs dotting the landscape.

The square at the eastern gate was in the shadow of the great wall. The sky was a light green on this autumn morning, not a single speck of cloud obscuring the view. A moderately chilly--but not yet cold--air was upon the earth.

The square was surrounded by buildings. About thirty two-story brick houses lined up in an arc. A wide road led from the square into the forest in the west. No one was in sight, save for the gatekeeper.

“This is a pretty big country.” The traveler said, unfolding a map in a corner of the square.

She was in her mid-teens, with short black hair and fair features. Her head was covered by a hat with a brim and ear flaps, and a pair of goggles mounted upon it. Under her brown coat she wore a black jacket, and a thick belt around her waist. At her right side was holstered a revolver-type persuader.

"Let me see, Kino." The motorrad said from beside her. The traveler called Kino flipped over the large map and showed it to the motorrad, who was laden with travel gear.

The map showed a circular country and its forested territory. Near its centre was the only developed area in the country, and little villages were scattered around it. Narrow roads connected one settlement to another.

"It is pretty big. The biggest country we've visited in a while. Oh, I have the gist of it memorized, so you can put it away, Kino. So what are you going to do today? Are we going to look for a repair shop?"

Kino neatly folded up the map and replied,

"First--"

"First?"

"I'm going to get something to eat. I think I'll have breakfast at that restaurant over there and think about it. Wait here, Hermes."

"Fine, fine. Take your sweet time." The motorrad called Hermes grumbled, a little taken aback.

The boy was eating hard, stale bread.

This was all he had to eat. No butter or jam. His room was tiny, furnished with only a bed, a dresser, and a small table. Atop the table was nothing but a mug of tea.

The boy was about twelve years of age. He was skinny, and a little small for a boy his age. He had black eyes and messy golden hair.

As for his clothing, they were humble at best and shoddy at worst. He wore long brown pants and a pair of rubber-soled work shoes, instead of dress shoes. His yellowish-brown shirt was fitted with an assortment of mismatched buttons, and his similarly colored jacket showed signs of having been patched up several times over.

The boy downed his bread in the blink of an eye and gulped down his tepid tea.

"Thanks for the meal! Here I go!" He said, as though gathering his strength. He stood from his seat and headed for the door. It only took him three steps. The boy grabbed the grey hat hanging beside it.

"I'm leaving now!" He said to the empty room, and ran off.

The girl was sipping warm soup.

The dining room was lavishly furnished. The girl sat alone at the table, which was much too big for one person. Her painstakingly-made breakfast was served to her on pieces of tableware so thin they looked like they would shatter with a single touch. Beside the soup was a soft croissant. Several kinds of butter and jam in little jars. In the salad dish was a heaping pile of vegetables and thinly-sliced tomatoes. There was a full glass teapot and a ceramic bowl filled with white sugar.

The girl was about twelve years of age. She was of an exceedingly normal build for her age. She had brown eyes, and her slightly messy red hair was tied into a pair of braided pigtails. Countless freckles were dotted around her nose.

As for her clothing, they were elegant at best and, at worst, extremely unfitting with her modest looks. Her light pink dress was adorned with white lace. There was so much lace that you couldn't possibly add any more if you tried. There were frills on her socks. Her amber-colored shoes, made of leather, were so polished that you could see your face in them.

As she finished her breakfast, someone quietly knocked on the door at the side. A middle-aged man in a tailcoat stepped inside and bowed respectfully.

“Thank you for the meal! It was wonderful!” The girl said energetically, in a clear, lovely voice.

“Off to work, then, Miss?” The man, who looked like the quintessential butler, said solemnly.

“Yes! I'll do my best today, too!” The girl exclaimed, wiping her mouth on a clean white napkin.

Hermes was waiting for Kino at a corner of the square.

"Ah, that was delicious."

Kino finally stepped out of the restaurant and returned to Hermes. Her hat and her coat were hanging off her left arm now. Around her waist, over her black jacket, was a thick belt with small green pouches.

On her back was another persuader, a thin .22 caliber automatic. The grip was pointing into the air so Kino could draw it with her left hand. Most of the barrel was exposed to the air, secured in a plastic holster.

Several birds that had been sitting on Hermes flew off as Kino approached.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Hermes the Bird's Nest."

"Welcome back, Kino the Glutton."

Kino had just placed her and coat on the luggage seat, when--

[Good morning, citizens. It's the start of a new day.]

A woman's voice was coming from the speakers installed on the lampposts along the streets.

"Kino, this must be another one of those countries where you have to do morning exercises to music. You should follow along." Hermes said. But there was no rhythmic exercise music.

[Take care of yourselves on this fine day, and start off the morning with some music.]

The moment the woman finished, a melody played by a violin began flowing from the speakers.

After the soft, gentle prelude came a high, clear voice. It was the voice of a young girl.

The song gently rained down on the morning like dewdrops.

The lyrics spoke of wanting to hold close the feeling of being in love with someone. It was a typical ballad, but that was exactly what highlighted the Diva's incredible capacity and skill.

"..."

The traveler, with two persuaders holstered at her waist, looked up into the sky as she stood beside the motorrad and listened.

As the song continued, the windows of the houses lining the streets opened one by one. People poked their heads out the window and tuned their ears to the melody.

The song soon came to an end.

[Have a wonderful day, everyone.]

With that final comment, the broadcast ended.

"No exercises, huh?" Hermes said, once the music had finished.

"That was amazing. The song itself was great, but the Diva's voice and technique was incredible. I love it." Kino said, lowering her gaze.

"It's not every day you're so impressed, Kino!"

The moment the song had ended, people began to move about in the square as though someone had pressed a button. Some walked towards the walls. Others opened the shutters of their shops. Some prepared horse-drawn carriages, and others started their cars.

A middle-aged woman wearing an apron turned to Kino from among the crowds and addressed her.

"Did you just come into our country, traveler? Did you hear the song? Wasn't it wonderful? Wasn't that voice just magnificent?"

"Yes, it was incredible." Kino said, agreeing on all four counts. the woman beamed.

"The Diva who sang just now is our country's pride and joy. She's a songstress loved by all our citizens."

"Huh, I guess she must be popular." Hermes said.

"Of course! Two years ago, a small company held auditions saying it would train a Diva who would be loved by the entire country. And this girl was picked out of the participants. Everyone fell in love with her the moment she made her debut, and now you'll hardly find anyone who's not a big fan of hers! Here, this is a picture of her." The woman said, taking out a photograph.

"I wanna see too!"

The woman, who was about to show Kino the picture, angled it so that even Hermes could see, lowering it slightly.

A girl around twelve or thirteen years of age was sitting on a chair. The beautiful girl was smiling. She had blue eyes as dark as a summer sky, and long golden curls reaching down to her waist. She was dressed in a blindingly white one-piece dress.

"This is the Diva? She's really pretty." Hermes said.

"You think so too, right? She's cute enough to eat! Just wait until you see her in the movies!" The woman said enthusiastically.

"..."

Kino looked at the picture in silence.

"Jealous?"

"Don't you just wish she was your girlfriend?"

Hermes and the woman asked simultaneously.

Kino first slammed down her fist on Hermes's fuel tank.

"Ouch."

She then gave the woman a perfunctory reply.

"I think she might be too good for me."

And,

"But her singing is wonderful. I've never heard anything so beautiful in all my travels."

The woman beamed radiantly.

"Oh my goodness! You're much too kind!" The woman said, as though she had been the one on the receiving end of the compliment. But her smile soon gave way to a darker look, as her tone dropped. She then spoke gravely.

"But really... I'm terribly worried."

"What are you talking about?" Hermes asked, noticing the sudden change in the woman's attitude. The woman looked down at the photograph and replied.

"I think... she must be having some health issues."

"The Diva?"

"Yes. She hasn't made any public appearances in the past few weeks. There's no news about any new songs, either. Until now, she's been participating in our country's official photoshoots, but now they say they don't even have one scheduled for the future. We're not getting any new photos of her in stores. Nothing about any new movies, either."

"Huh."

"Now this is just a rumor, but some people say that she can't make any appearances for a while because she injured her face. That's why she can't work on any more movies, and has to go somewhere distant to recover."

"Huh."

"This is terrible! What if she has to retire? What will we do?" The woman cried, raising the photograph into the air.

"Oh, what to do...?" The woman muttered, hobbling away.

"..."

"..."

Kino and Hermes were left alone in the square.

"Now what, Kino?"

"Why don't we go check out the central district? We'll figure out our accommodations and then look for a repair shop."

"Agreed!"

As Kino put on her coat and began climbing onto Hermes--

"Oh! You've finally made it!"

A middle-aged man came up to them from directly behind Kino. Kino turned around to face him.

He was a bearded man in his fifties. His thin hair was cut very short. He wore a vest with over a dozen pockets, and there was an automatic persuader holstered over his right thigh.

"Hi, Mister!" Hermes replied instantly. Kino greeted him as well.

"Good morning. We just came in this morning."

The man stopped just in front of Kino and Hermes. Kino continued.

"The gates here closed earlier than we expected. We ended up having to spend another night outside."

"Of course. How did you like the waterfalls?"

"They were amazing. I'd never seen water spouting up from the ground."

"Glad to hear that. Anyway, I hear you'll be staying here for three days. You'll be leaving on the day after tomorrow, then?"

"That's right."

"Our team's also planning to leave that day and head west, just like you. I'd like to ask you to work as our bodyguard until we reach the next country. What do you say?" The man offered.

"..."

Kino did not answer immediately. The man continued.

"I understand it might not be your style to move slowly with a caravan, but we're in need of skilled guardsmen. And if you have time, I'd like to ask you to train some of my men, as well. We'll pay for the ammunition, of course."

"..."

"Your choice, Kino." Hermes said.

The man, having come to the conclusion that he was very close to convincing Kino, raised his index finger into the air.

"In payment, we'll provide you with all meals while you're traveling with us. We've bought a mountain of ingredients here, and you know how good our cook is! If you want, we could even have venison. What do you say?"

"I'll do it!" Kino nodded firmly.

"Simple as always." Hermes mumbled to himself. The man gave a hearty laugh.

"I knew you'd say yes! Then what do you say to leaving in the evening, the day after tomorrow? We'll be waiting for you at the west gate. Oh, and if you have any large cargo that needs carrying, we'll take it to the next country for you. Try buying something that Hermes can't carry. Why not get some experience doing big business?"

"Buy products I can sell for a profit? Well... I'll have to decline." Kino said, waving her hands.

"Well, if you change your mind. This country makes some great furniture and ornaments. You'd make a fortune selling them anywhere. And I'm not sure, but I hear there's a pretty big division of wealth in this country. Half the country's in poverty, with some middle-class people and even fewer rich people. Those messy alleys over there are where the lower class live. There's everything from kidnappings to muggings going on back there, so try not to get involved." The man grinned, "Don't wanna leave too many people injured in your way, eh? But if you need any ammunition or gunpowder, we'd be happy to sell you some."

"Oh, right. Thank you. I'll try to keep a low profile."

"Hah! Then we'll see you later. We've got big business ahead."

Once the man left, Kino mumbled to herself.

"Furniture and ornaments, huh...?"

"You can't, Kino. You don't have an eye for anything that big, do you?"

Kino climbed onto Hermes and raised the side stand.

"I have something to say to that, but I'll let you have this one, Hermes. If nothing else, I hope we make some fun memories in this country."

"Do your best."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Stepping down on the kick starter, Kino started Hermes.

"Now let's go find a repair shop."

Near the centre of the city, in the affluent area of the country, stood a particularly tall building.

It was still under construction, and everything above the fortieth floor was still being worked on with cranes, its steel frames exposed to the wind. Construction workers traversed the walkways without any harnesses.

At the bottom of the building, on ground level, were laborers carrying material from the large trucks to the building. The many workmen went back and forth between the truck and the building again and again.

Among them was one particularly small person.

It was the boy who had been eating the stale bread that morning. His shirt was drenched with sweat as he worked desperately amongst the adults, hoisting a large sack onto his shoulder. No one tried to help him, despite his age. The boy just kept working quietly without showing a hint of weakness, as though he did not want any sympathy in the first place.

It was just between breakfast and lunchtime. People, horse-drawn carriages, and cars went back and forth along the streets, and police officers guided traffic at the intersections. A motorrad laden with traveling gear also passed by the building.

In the display cases of the shops lining the streets were beautiful clothing and jewelry. The customers browsing the products were all ladies and gentlemen in elegant, fashionable clothing.

Soon, the back of the truck had been emptied completely.

"All right! Take a breather 'til the next shipment comes in!" The foreman, wearing a suit and a helmet, announced to the workers.

The workers relaxed immediately, plopping down where they stood to get some rest. Some gulped water from kettles sitting on crates. Others chatted with their co-workers. And as for the boy--

"I'll be back really soon!"

With that, he dashed over to the building across the street.

"What's up with him? Where's he going?" One of the adults wondered, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Probably to see Little Miss Diva again." Another said with a laugh.

The boy crossed the wide street and came to a stop in front of a store situated on the first floor of the building. Behind the glass window were gramophones connected to radios. In the middle of the display stood a single poster.

"Wow..."

The boy sighed, looking at the poster. It was a picture of a girl sitting in a chair.

She was about twelve or thirteen years of age. She had blue eyes as dark as a summer sky, and long golden curls reaching down to her waist. She was dressed in a blindingly white one-piece dress. The beautiful girl was smiling in utter silence.

The boy took off his hat and put it over his chest. His eyes lit up as they looked at the girl's.

With the ring of a bell, the shop's door opened. The middle-aged store owner stepped outside.

"Ah, Elias!" He said warmly to the boy.

The boy called Elias did not even notice him for a few seconds, but eventually turned around and greeted the man.

"Oh! Good morning!"

"Here, have a listen before you go."

With that, music began to play from the speakers set up at the storefront. After the prelude came the Diva's beautiful voice.

"Wow..."

Elias looked at the poster of the smiling girl. He closed his eyes and listened to the song.

People passing by along the sidewalk stopped to listen to the music flowing from the shop. Dozens of passersby gathered to appreciate the song until its final note.

When the song ended, Elias opened his eyes and thanked the shop owner.

"Thank you, Mister!"

He returned to the building across the street, back to work. The owner waved and watched him depart.

"..."

He then looked down at the price tag on the gramophone with the radio attached.

On it was written an amount of money that an impoverished citizen like Elias could not earn even if he worked for the next ten years.

Elias ran as fast as he could to the construction site. But he no longer had anything to do.

"There's been a mistake somewhere. The next truck won't be here today. Everyone is dismissed." The foreman said. Elias turned to him.

"What about our pay?"

"One quarter of the day's wages. Here you are."

the man handed him two coins. Elias took hold of them and put them in his pocket.

"Is that all today? You don't have any other work?"

The man shook his head.

"No. Go on home."

"Okay..."

As Elias began walking away, downcast, the man landed one final blow.

"You don't need to come out tomorrow, either."

"Wh-why not?" Elias asked, shocked.

"We're downsizing. Cutting a few positions here and there, including yours."

"Why me? I'm working as hard as I can!" Elias demanded, looking up at the man. But the man did not so much as twitch.

"We know you're doing your best. But you just can't work as efficiently as the adults. And also--"

"Also?"

"Because you were away just now. It's a lot easier to fire someone who's not around."

"But we were on break just now!"

"Yeah, but the decision is final. Find yourself a new job."

The man ended the conversation.

"No..."

Elias hung his head. The man left.

It was just before noon that Elias returned to the alley near his home.

It was an area where little buildings were built together in clusters. The people looked very different from the ones who frequented the city centre with its large buildings. Men lay about on the street, drunk before midday. Women hung their laundry in the gaps between houses. Elias passed by these people and made his way to the shack where his room was.

He turned a corner, into the deserted gaps between the dirty buildings where not even the sun shone down.

"What, not working today?"

A man addressed him from behind. Elias turned around. A man in his late twenties stood in the alleyway. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a clean jacket. There was something like a condescending grin on his narrow face.

"Hi, Rob." Elias greeted him. "I lost my job. I can't believe they fired me just because I'm a kid. No more bread until I find a new job, I guess."

Rob thought for a moment, looking at Elias.

"Hm..."

He stepped closer, and whispered.

"So you're looking for a job, huh? What do you say to working with us?"

"What? But..."

Elias could not give an immediate answer. Rob nodded nonchalantly.

"Right. It's a dangerous job. We kidnap rich people."

"I... No thank you."

"Too bad about that. But the pay's real good, you know. I know you want to buy one of those radio-gramophones one day, right? So you can listen to the Diva all day long?"

"..."

"How long d'you think it'll take for you to earn your way with manual labor? Since your parents passed away, you can barely keep food on the table, can you?"

"..."

"Look, Elias. Kidnapping is a great business here. All the rich people are insured against kidnapping. They'll pay up. We release the hostages without a fuss, and not even the insurance firms lose out--everyone trusts a company that'll pay properly. And we use that money for the slums to make people here happy. It's a win-win situation. We take money from the rich and give to the poor. Don't think so badly of it."

A shadow was cast over Elias's eyes. He thought for several seconds.

"B-but... a kid like me can't do anything." Elias said pessimistically.

"Not at all, Elias. We have jobs for kids like you, too. That's why I'm asking you. What do you say? You can do it once and quit, if you want. No one's gonna catch you."

"..."

"Don't you want that Diva's record?"

"I..."

"I know, I know. Just this once. And you won't do it ever again."

"..."

"So, you coming, or what?" Rob asked definitively. Elias finally nodded.

At this very moment, his life had changed forever.

Some time later.

Elias was in a room different from his own, but equally as messy and with the addition of bottles of liquor rolling around on the floor.

"..."

He was sitting by himself, idly waiting for his job.

In the next room over (also quite messy), were three men. One of them was Rob, who had recruited Elias. Another was a bearded, muscled man in his forties. The other was a skinny, bald man who also seemed to be in his forties.

"..."

The skinny man said nothing, but he looked rather upset that Rob had brought Elias along.

"I'm sorry for just bringing him along, Kane. Juan. But I'm telling you, he's gonna be useful."

"So tell us why." The bearded man called Juan said coldly.

"All right. First off, Elias here has no criminal record. He's always been living on the straight and narrow. He's one of the only guys in this area the cops don't have an eye out for. And since our target's around his age, we can count on him to act as the guard. Elias's place is in a shack a little ways from here. The cops never really patrol that area. We keep the hostage in there, and the three of us can go get the ransom money. It's a lot more secure than just going in pairs." Rob stated. The skinny man called Kane still looked dissatisfied, but he did not object.

"And you're saying that if things come down to it, we can forget the kid and run." Juan said.

"Right. If things come down to it." Rob agreed nonchalantly.

"All right." Juan said.

"We only need to give him a little cut of the share." Rob commented. Juan glared at him.

Rob flinched slightly. Juan spoke.

"As long as he's a part of the team, he gets an equal share."

A lone car drove through the forest road, sending dried-up leaves flying in its wake. It was a black civilian vehicle, extremely common in this country.

The afternoon was coming to a close. The sun was halfway between its apex and the horizon.

Rob was in the driver's seat. Sitting next to him in silence was Kane. Juan and Elias sat in the back seats, where the windows were tinted.

Elias nervously watched the forest pass by through the tinted glass.

He then glanced over at Juan, sitting to his left. Juan took off his suit jacket, laid it out on his lap, and placed a persuader and ammunition on top of it. He was loading the small .22 caliber rounds into a long, thin magazine.

Under the muscled man's left arm was a holster containing a long, thin automatic persuader, and under his right arm was a small pocket for the magazine.

"..."

Elias silently watched Juan loading the magazine.

Their eyes met. Elias looked up at him and asked,

"A-are you... going to use that?"

"If necessary." Juan replied, his expression unchanging. "But normally they're for warning shots. Not even bodyguards are willing to risk their lives for meagre pay. They usually surrender if we aim first. I'll only shoot them if they refuse to cooperate."

Once the magazine was fully loaded, Juan drew his persuader from the holster.

It was a black automatic model with a thick cylinder attached to the barrel--a silencer. Juan loaded the magazine into the persuader, armed the safety, and holstered it again.

"D, do you think I could use it too?" Elias asked. The man shook his head.

"You're not up to it yet. and..."

"And?"

Juan met Elias's eyes, looking down at him.

"If you don't need to take up a persuader, it's better to leave things that way." He said definitively.

It was a certain hotel room, furnished with a large bed, an extravagant desk, and lace curtains.

"Finished!"

Kino, wearing a white shirt, finished cleaning the revolver she called [Cannon].

Newspaper was spread out over the desk, and a sparkling clean high-caliber revolver lay on it in three pieces. The main body, including the grip and the hammer; the cylindrical magazine, shaped like a lotus root; and the octagonal barrel in front of the magazine.

"Now I just need to put it back together."

Kino slotted the magazine into the main body, inserted the barrel, and locked it all into place with small fitting mechanisms. Within seconds, the revolver was back to its original shape.

Kino's other firearm, the automatic persuader called [Woodsman], was also holstered and lying on a corner of the desk.

With a practiced hand, Kino cleaned up the brush, oiling tools, and other the things she used for cleaning the persuaders. She then walked over to the sink and washed her hands with soap.

In the opposite corner of the room, by the entrance, Hermes stood on his side stand. The travel gear had all been unloaded, and a rifle-type persuader was leaning against the rear wheel.

The front of the persuader was metallic and black. On its right side was a cylindrical silencer, and underneath was a bipod. Its rear was comprised of a wooden stock, and atop it was a telescopic sight. Kino called this persuader [Flute].

Next to [Flute], on Hermes's luggage seat, was a booklet titled: "National 52-Type Rifle Maintenance Manual ~Don't get left behind! Let's all do our best~ Published by the Ministry of Defense".

"Finally. Good work, Kino." Hermes said. Kino returned, wiping her hands.

"It really is a lot of work, cleaning two persuaders thoroughly like that."

"Why don't you just sell one?"

"I don't think so. I have a lot of memories with both of them. I'll just have to make sure I don't get saddled with any more."

"I guess that's about all you can do, huh?"

"That goes for motorrads, too."

"Right. So what are you going to do about that part I need?"

"Let's just hope we get lucky at the next country."

"But there's no guarantee, is there?"

"No..."

Kino mumbled, and fell back onto her bed. She bounced on the mattress a few times, then stretched out her arms.

"I'm going to sleep now. Until evening. Actually, I'll just sleep until dinnertime."

"Good night. But don't complain to me about how you can't fall asleep tonight even though you actually have a bed for once." Hermes said. Kino shut her eyes.

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

The car containing Elias and the others was driving on a road outside the city.

To their left was a lake, the rays of the afternoon sun beautifully scattering over the waves. To their right was a forest. It was a beautiful place, where reddening trees were reflected on the water's surface.

The road was wide, but it was not paved. The car was driving rather quickly, working up dust in its wake.

In front of them was another car--a large, luxurious model with white lace curtains on the rear windshield. There were no other cars or people passing by.

"That's our mark. It's even avoiding the crowded roads. The license plate matches up with our info, too. Get to work." Juan said. The men nodded.

Elias, his face covered in cold sweat, held on as tight as he could to the armrests and breathed heavily.

"..."

The car sped up and caught up to the one ahead. It then crossed over to the opposite lane to pass it.

Rob loudly sounded his klaxon. At the same time, Kane opened his window, took out something spherical from the inside of his jacket, and lobbed it at the expensive car.

"Hey! You guys!" He shouted to the driver of the other car.

The uniformed man at the driver's seat opened his window slightly in confusion.

"The back of your car's on fire! Stop your car!"

Small wisps of black smoke were billowing from the trunk of the expensive car.

The fumes were coming from the smoke bomb Kane had thrown earlier. It was something looking like a rubber ball, fitted with an adhesive so it would stick to the trunk.

The uniformed driver, oblivious to all this, quickly slammed on the breaks.

The two cars--the expensive one and the one Elias was sitting in--slowed down in the blink of an eye. The sound of their wheels came to a halt in the middle of the road.

Leaving the stone-face Elias, Kane and Juan disembarked.

"Hey! You have a fire extinguisher on there?" They asked, approaching the expensive car. Because the car had stopped, the smoke was starting to envelop it completely. The uniformed driver nervously opened the back door of the car.

"There seems to be something wrong, Miss! Please step out of the vehicle!"

The two people sitting in the back stepped outside.

One was a well-built man in a black suit. A bodyguard. The other was a girl in a very frilly pink dress, who wore a hat with such a wide brim that her face was almost completely covered.

"Where's the fire extinguisher?"

"Get back. this is dangerous."

Kane and Juan said, and approached the driver and the bodyguard respectively.

"It's in the trunk-"

As the driver began to point towards the trunk, Kane struck his head with something like a black rod. It was a soft leather pocket filled with sand. The driver's hat flew into the air. He crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

At about the same time, Juan hit the bodyguard on the head.

"Oof!"

The bodyguard, by no means a small man, fell to the asphalt. Because he had been trying to run with the girl in his arms, the girl also fell to the ground with a soft scream.

Juan sprayed something into the girl's face. She lost consciousness instantly, her eyes closing and her head falling limp.

"I'm sorry about this. Just sleep for a little while."

Taking the girl in his arm, Juan signaled to Kane to withdraw. They stepped back onto the car in an instant. Rob drove off as soon as the doors slammed shut.

The car disappeared, leaving behind clearing smoke and the two fallen men, still groaning from pain.

It was a beautiful place, where reddening trees were reflected on the water's surface.

As the car drove down a narrow road in the forest, scattering leaves in its wake--

"That was a piece of cake!" Rob grinned, still at the driver's seat.

"Looks like we're in the clear..." Kane said, wiping sweat off his face as he checked the rear-view mirror.

"Give me a hand here." Juan said to Elias, sitting in the middle seat in the back. He put a blanket over the sleeping girl.

"Oh, right!"

Elias awkwardly helped Juan put the blanket over the girl. That was when Juan took off her hat. The girl's face came into view.

She was just about Elias's age.

Her slightly messy red hair was tied into a pair of braided pigtails. Countless freckles were dotted around her nose. He could hear soft breathing from her mouth.

"..."

Even when the blanket hid her face from view, Elias did not take his eyes off her.

"You fallin' for her, Elias?" Rob chuckled, looking back. Kane scolded him, telling him to keep his eyes on the road.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!" Elias stuttered.

"Right. 'Cause your sweetheart's a blonde, huh?" Rob joked. Kane tilted his head in confusion.

"The kid here's a fan of the Diva. And a die-hard one, at that."

"Who in this country isn't a fan of the Diva?" Juan commented from the back.

"Well, sure. But this kid's around her age, so I'd say he might as well be in love. Growing up together's nice, but he's just dreamin' about maybe getting to marry her one day."

"I... I just like her singing, that's all!" Elias said stubbornly. "Sure, she's pretty, but that's only second to her songs!"

"Oh, really?" Rob snickered. Elias turned to look out the window, pouting slightly. Kane spoke up.

"About that Diva. I've been hearing some bad rumors lately."

Elias's head turned again.

"She's not putting out any new movies or photo books, is she? I hear she's really sick, or she's badly hurt--so bad that she might not be able to sing again."

"N-no way! That's not true!" Elias said defiantly. Of course, it wasn't as though he had any proof; it was all wishful thinking.

"I'm not so sure 'bout that. She's been on hiatus for an awful long time now." Rob said.

"No..."

Elias looked dejected.

"That's just a rumor. Without information, we can't take it at face value. Don't come to hasty conclusions without the right info."

Juan calmly addressed Elias, in a tone very much like a teacher.

"Elias, do you know why that driver just now stopped his car for our smoke bomb? Even though everyone knows how often people are kidnapped on the road?"

Elias's eyes widened. He thought for a moment.

"...I don't know. Why?"

"It's because of those expensive cars. Those models have a critical defect. A lot of times, heat from the exhaust pipe ends up torching the entire car. The manufacturer's doing its damndest to cover it up, but the rich consumers all know the rumors. That's why giving them a bit of smoke is enough to pull the wool over their eyes. And that's why they end up doing something they never should--pulling up and opening their door."

"I get it! That's incredible..."

Elias was floored. Juan continued his lecture.

"Remember. You should never take action without concrete information backing you up. You don't need 'courage' or anything like that. To me, trying to be brave is no different from stupidity."

Looking at Juan's bearded face, Elias answered:

"O-okay."

Juan again looked ahead.

The car came out from the forest and into a wide paved road connecting two villages, mingling with the other vehicles on the road. Rob drove the car normally, not going too quickly as they passed by the occasional house and store along the way.

Suddenly--

"Cops." Rob said sharply. Three blue police cars approached from ahead, their sirens wailing.

"Eek!" Elias shrieked softly.

"Stay calm. Keep driving, pretend nothing's wrong. Those cops aren't after us." Juan said calmly.

And just as he said, the police cars loudly disappeared behind them.

Elias, still pale from shock, turned to Juan.

"That's amazing... What about now? You didn't have information or anything, so how'd you know?"

"Experience and intuition." Juan answered.

She awoke to the sight of a ceiling covered in stains.

A small light was hanging without even a lampshade. It was not lit, but the evening sun leaking in through the window illuminated the room adequately.

"So you're awake, young lady." A man said.

The pigtailed, red-headed girl slowly sat up, and realized that she was lying on a bed. The room was very small and cluttered.

"Who are you?"

She could see four strangers surrounding her.

Rob, Kane, and Juan, the man who had just addressed her. And Elias, standing off to the side, petrified.

"I want you to stay calm and listen to what we have to say. We--"

But before Juan could even finish--

"You're kidnappers, right? You're holding me for ransom." The girl said, eyes wide and voice clear. She sounded surprisingly calm for a girl who had just been kidnapped.

"..."

Elias tilted his head.

"That's right. You understand what's going on, then."

The girl quietly got to her feet and bowed at Juan courteously as he stepped back.

"My name is Sarah Lawrence. My address is 3-5 Second Residence District, in the Eastern Quarter. My phone number is Eastern Quarter 299835, and my secret phrase is 'White Clothes and a Hat'."

"Sarah, then. You've been taught well. You've saved us the trouble of explaining, eh?"

Juan and the girl called Sarah began their conversation.

Elias, feeling somewhat lost, whispered to Rob: Why had the girl given up her name and address so easily? And what was this 'secret phrase' she was talking about? Rob responded in a hushed tone.

"Rich people educate their children to comply to kidnappers' demands without resisting, to make it easier to resolve the situation. They teach 'em to stay calm and tell people like us their name and address, and a secret phrase that the parents can use to make sure that it's really their own kid we have."

"I see..."

"As for us, as long as we've been paid, we're responsible for keeping the hostage safe. This is a business. It also means that if we don't get paid and they attack us instead, we won't have any qualms about killing the hostage. Although that never happens. Us kidnappers definitely have the upper hand in these negotiations, but we can't call crazy high numbers for the ransom, either."

"Wow, I see..."

As Elias continued to marvel at the workings of this 'business', Juan and Sarah were speaking very amicably.

Juan told her, in gentle tone reminiscent of a teacher:

If they made the ransom demand now, the money would be delivered this evening at the earliest. In other words, she would not be released until tonight or the morning after, and so she might have to spend the night here. He also informed her that the streets outside were dangerous, and that they could take no responsibility for what happened to her if she decided to escape the room.

"I understand. I'll wait quietly." Sarah replied like a studious student. She sounded very mature for her age.

"Anyway, Sarah--" Juan said, and signaled Elias over with his fingers. Elias stepped forward. His eyes met Sarah's.

"Oh? You have another one?" Sarah asked, surprised but pleasantly so.

"..."

Elias could feel himself being overwhelmed by her firm gaze and stepped back slightly, still not understanding what Sarah meant by 'another one'.

"No, this here's one of us. He'll be your watch while you're here."

"Oh my goodness! A weak-looking boy like you?" Sarah said to Elias, eyes wide. Rob and Kane chuckled quietly. As for Elias, his embarrassment turned to anger.

"That's big talk coming from a hostage!"

"Oh? Hostages are really important, you know? You're going to have to trade me in for a lot of money! We couldn't get much money from kidnapping someone like you, I bet." Sarah replied proudly, her pigtails swinging. Elias couldn't think of a response.

"..."

He gritted his teeth. Juan put a hand on his shoulder.

"This kid here's called Ellie."

"That's a girly name. Ellie, are you actually a girl?"

Elias lost his temper again. Juan continued calmly.

"No, it's just a pseudonym. We're supposed to be the bad guys, after all. Ellie here's going to keep an eye on you until we can let you go, so play nice, you hear?"

"Of course. I understand."

"You'll be home safe by tomorrow morning. Let me remind you that we'll come get you tomorrow. So stay put. We can't guarantee your safety if you decide to run out on us."

"Yes." Sarah answered confidently. Juan turned to Elias.

"We're counting on you, kid. Promise me you'll do your job well."

"Yes." Elias nodded nervously.

"All right."

Juan turned around to leave with the others. Kane looked over at Elias and Sarah for a moment, and followed after Juan.

"Here." Rob said, holding out a large paper bag. Elias took it into his arms and looked inside. There were some soft-looking loaves of bread and a jar of expensive-looking jam. Elias gulped quietly and placed the bag on the table.

"We're counting on you. Just do what we went over earlier. Close the curtains and wait for us to contact you." Rob instructed.

With that, the three men left the room. Elias first made sure to lock the door. He then switched on the dim old lamp and shut the curtains, as Rob told him to do. They looked more like rags than anything, but they were enough to conceal the interior of the room from prying eyes.

"Phew..."

Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, Elias addressed Sarah, who still stood beside the bed, He made sure to speak firmly so she wouldn't treat him like an idiot.

"Take a seat. You can take the chair or the bed, whichever one you like. You'll get in the way if you stand around like that."

But when he looked into her eyes--

"Oh..."

Elias realized something: Sarah, who had looked so confident until just a moment ago, was trembling as though she was just about to burst into tears.

"I'm not scared of you, okay?!" She screeched, choking back a sob.

Elias was astonished.

"I was just scared of that man with the beard! They taught me that the more polite a kidnapper is, the more dangerous he is, so I shouldn't try to resist!"

"Oh... Right." Elias nodded lightly several times.

"I know... I understand. He looks like he'd be really scary if he got angry."

"I'm not staying put because I'm scared of you, okay?!"

"Okay, okay. I know. I'm not strong. I don't even have any weapons. Phew..."

"Fine! I'm not going to talk to you! I'm not going to run away, but I'm just going to ignore anything you say!"

"..."

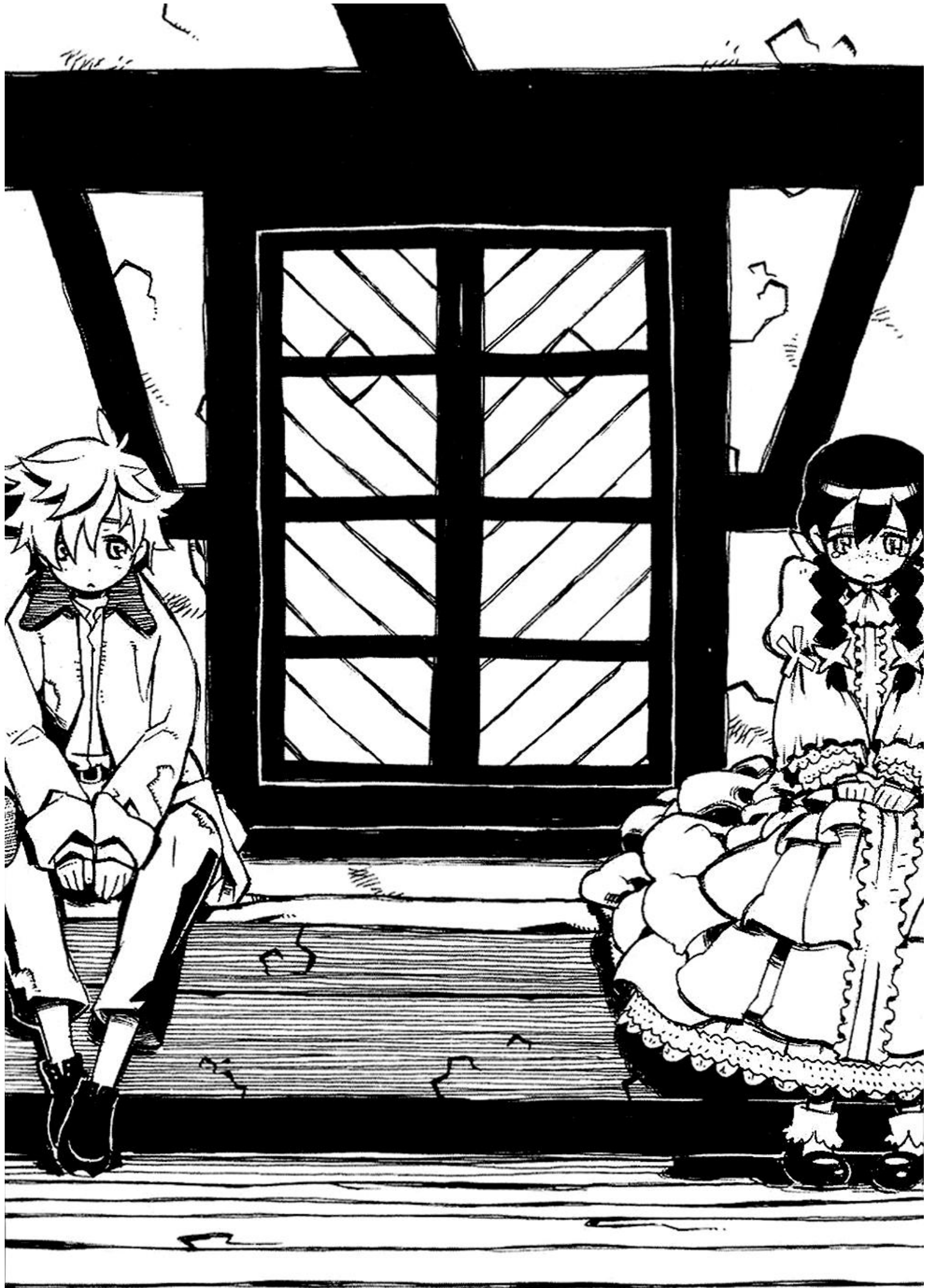
Elias, unable to reply, plunked down on a corner of his bed.

Sarah sniffled and took a seat on the opposite corner.

"..."

"..."

They remained silent for some time. All they could hear was the noise from the streets outside.



Someone's stomach grumbled.

Elias turned to his right. Sarah sat there with her head bowed, blushing red like a tomato with a slightly angry look.

"Hey... Do you want some bread?" Elias stammered.

"Yes." Sarah replied coolly, her head still bowed.

"Yes. That's correct. That is without a doubt Miss Sarah."

A butler was taking a phone call in an extravagant parlor. It was the butler who had come to get the girl earlier that day.

Standing around him were a group of men in suits. There were no police officers or their uniforms. The men were all listening very carefully to the conversation between the butler and the kidnappers, displeasure clear on their faces.

The evening sun was casting light in through the window. A tint of orange began to blend into the clear blue sky. The gravel-lined garden outside the window slowly changed into the color of dusk.

[Do not underestimate us.] Juan said calmly on the other side of the phone. His voice was being projected through a small speaker on the parlor desk, audible to everyone in the room.

"Of course. We've concluded from your magnificent strategy that you are a seasoned veteran. Yes, we will pay the ransom for the young lady. Yes. Of course. We will have the money on hand very shortly."

The butler, ever the picture of calm, firmly held the receiver and continued to respond courteously.

[Then let me set the exchange point. You, the one I'm talking to. I want you to come alone. Understand?]

"Of course, sir."

[We'll meet right after sundown.]

"Yes, sir. Where-"

But before the butler could ask where exactly they were to meet, a middle-aged man in a suit rushed into the room. Everyone in the parlor turned towards him in surprise.

The newcomer addressed the other men.

"I just got word... She's gone."

His face was covered in sweat.

The air in the room grew cold in a matter of seconds. No one spoke for some time.

[Hey!] Juan's voice came on through the speakers. Everyone turned back towards it, jolted from their daze.

"Oh! Please excuse me, sir. The telephone seems to be acting up." The butler lied, apologizing. At the same time, he looked towards the men standing around him.

One of the men signaled the butler, pointing his index finger at him and raising his thumb.

It was the silent motion of firing a persuader. The man then went on to move his open hand horizontally in front of his neck. It was clearly a signal to kill.

"..."

His expression unmoving, the butler quietly nodded. He then said to the man on the other end of the phone,

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. I've just received word that it may take some time for us to prepare the ransom. Would this evening be all right with you?"

It was evening. The sun, now a bright orange orb, hung just over the reddening forest.

Kino and Hermes were both asleep. But all of a sudden, the doorbell chimed--and without even waiting for a response, the person outside began to knock frantically.

"...Huh?" Kino groaned, raising her head.

"I think you've got a guest, Kino." Hermes said.

Kino sat up, annoyed, and approached the door as she unholstered [Cannon] with her right hand.

"Room service, maybe?" Hermes wondered. Kino mumbled something about how that wasn't right, and stepped towards the door.

She did not open it, however; Kino stood a short distance away and spoke.

"Who is it?"

"Traveler? You are the traveler, right?!"

It was a man's voice.

"Um, yes. I am."

"I've heard from the merchant who arrived yesterday that you're a skilled fighter. We need your help, traveler. Please! There's no time!"

"Huh?"

Kino tilted her head.

Elias's room was filled with the red light of dusk.

"Whew. Thanks for the meal."

"..."

Sarah expressed her satisfaction with the two or so hot dog buns with jam spread she had gobbled up. Elias was nothing short of stunned at her appetite. She sat on the chair, and he on the edge of his bed.

On the table were tiny breadcrumbs, a bottle of jam now more than half empty, and a mug of tea. Because Elias only had one mug, Sarah was the only one who got to drink anything. Elias had brewed the tea for her.

"I never knew rich girls could eat so much." Elias said.

"Well, now you know. You have a lot of prejudices about rich people, don't you?" Sarah replied nonchalantly. They were now conversing like normal people.

"How am I supposed to know anything about how you rich people live, anyway?" Elias mumbled.

"You said your name was Ellie, right?"

"Y-yeah."

"Don't you have any parents?"

"No. It was just me and my mom before, but she passed away the year before last."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't need your pity, okay? I can work and feed myself just fine. Things might look pretty bad now, but I'm going to work hard until I can make things better for myself!"

"I'm not pitying you. I don't have any parents either." Sarah said plainly. Elias gaped in shock.

"What's wrong? Is it really that surprising?"

"Then... How are you supporting yourself?"

"I'm living with some adults right now, but... I'm actually just like you."

"What do you mean?" Elias asked, tilting his head. Sarah proudly held her head high.

"I'm saying that I'm working to feed myself! And I earn a whole lot more than you do!"

"Don't act so high-and-mighty! As if I care how much more money you make!"

"And not just that. I'm older than you, too, right? How old are you, Ellie? About ten?"

"No way! I'm twelve years old!"

"And when's your birthday?"

"Last month!"

"Then I guess I am older than you! I'm turning thirteen next month."

Elias was even more incensed at this, but he could no longer retort.

"Oh, I'm feeling a bit thirsty. May I have another cup of tea?" Sarah said, in an almost condescendingly elegant tone. Elias pouted and got off his seat. He went over to the small electric stove in the corner, checked the weight of the kettle, and turned on the stove.

Then,

"Once I get my pay, I'm going to buy a gramophone and a record. I just have to hold out until then." He mumbled to himself.

"Did you just say something?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing." Elias replied.

Evening.

The sun had already set, with not even a vestige of its light remaining on the land. The full moon was lighting up the eastern skies.

Three men stood in a clearing in a thin forest. It was Juan, Kane, and Rob. As the trees cast shadows upon the ground, the men stood with each of their backs to a different tree, each facing a different direction.

There were no houses nearby. In fact, there was no artificial source of light at all. The buzzing of insects enveloped the men in layers.

Kane glanced down at his wristwatch, and silently lowered his arm.

"Hey. From the west." Juan said. The men turned in that direction.

They could see a headlight in the distance. The stream of light, occasionally broken by the trees, was clearly approaching them.

"What's this? They never said anything about coming by motorrad." Rob wondered, drawing a small revolver from inside his jacket. It was a type of persuader with an extremely short barrel, its main body partially covering the hammer. One could even fire it from inside one's pocket.

"Don't make a move before I do. Got it?" Juan said definitively, and looked directly at the approaching light. The soft rumbling of the engine grew louder.

The motorrad crushed the grass under its wheels as it slowly drew near. The headlight disappeared, then emerged again from behind a tree as it illuminated Juan. The motorrad came to a stop.

The rumbling of the engine went silent. The forest was once more filled with the sound of insects and the moonlight.

Moonlight glinted off the motorrad's dull fuel tank. The metallic clang of the rider lowering the side stand sounded loudly through the woods.

"Excuse me, you three over there." Kino said, as calm as though she were addressing a next-door neighbor. The men exchanged glances, shocked at the newcomer's youthful voice.

"What do you want?" Juan asked.

"I'd like to buy 'White Clothes and a Hat'." Kino answered.

Hearing this, Juan gestured for Rob to remain at the tree beside him, and for Kane to come along. The men approached Kino, striding across the grass with persuaders in their jackets.

Kino was wearing a black jacket. She had her hat pressed down over her head, and she was wearing her goggles. At her right side was [Cannon], and behind her back was holstered the[Woodsman].

Looking at the confident men approaching her, Kino addressed them pleasantly.

"So you would be the 'Dealers', correct?"

The men stopped just several meters short of reaching her. Juan spoke, looking Kino in the eye.

"That's right. And who are you?"

"I'm a traveler. I just arrived in this country earlier today."

"And why are you here?"

"I've been hired for a job. I was told to bring this case here and hand it over to you, in exchange for the location of 'White Clothes and a Hat'. My employer seems to be a butler working for a rich family. I don't know much else, only that he had urgent business and couldn't come to drop this off personally."

"Where's the case?" Kane asked. Kino pointed to Hermes.

"I've secured it to the back of my motorrad with elastic wire. Should I untie it now?"

Juan nodded. Kino went around to Hermes's back and untied the case from the luggage seat. She took the metal case, slowly approached the men, and laid it down on the grass about four meters ahead. She then took several steps backwards.

Juan and Kane approached the case. Kane took hold of it and opened it. Inside were wads upon wads of bills. Kane checked the inside of the case, and checked to see that the bills were real. He then counted them.

"All right."

Kane closed the case. It snapped shut with a click.

At that very moment, Hermes, who had been silent all this time, began counting so quietly that no one could hear.

"One... Two..."

"Please tell me where I can find 'White Clothes and a Hat'." Kino said.

"You know where the 15th District of the Southern Quarter is? Go to number 18, and you'll find shack 23. She's in one of the rooms."

"Huh?"

The moment he heard Juan, Rob quietly made a surprised noise. But Juan continued undeterred.

"There should be a boy around her age keeping guard. We threatened him with persuaders to use his room for a bit. He might try to say he's one of us, but we just threatened him into sticking to that story. He's a victim too, in that sense, so tell the cops to take good care of him along with 'White Clothes and a Hat'."

Kino tilted her head ever-so-slightly.

"I'm not entirely clear on the situation, so let me get this straight. Shack 23 at number 18, in the 15th District in the Southern Quarter. And I should protect 'White Clothes and a Hat', along with the boy?"

"That's right. Then our deal's finished." Juan said, and turned away.

Rob kept a close eye on Kino's movements as Juan and Kane walked away from her.

Kino watched them silently.

The men soon disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

"What're you planning, Juan?" Rob asked as Juan and Kane returned. He was still holding his revolver.

The men quickly strode through the woods, towards the car they had parked out of sight in the distance. Juan answered Rob's question.

"What do you think I'm planning? The kid's done. He's finished his job."

"Then you were planning this from the start? To borrow his room and buy us time to escape?"

Juan acknowledged this.

"That's all that kid can do for us."

"I wish you'd told me from the beginning..." Rob trailed off. Kane, carrying the case, finally spoke up.

"Sorry for not telling you ahead of time."

He did not sound the least bit apologetic.

Rob scratched his head.

"Argh, all right. Then what about his share? Are we gonna pocket that?"

"I'm going to make an account to deposit his share into. I'll tell him about it once the whole mess dies down. I'll send him the account, along with one of those records he wants so badly." Juan answered.

"That's one heck of a carefree plan. ...Well, I have no objections." Rob said, somewhat incredulous. "So, what about us? What'll our next job be?" He asked quickly.

"There is no next job." Juan answered.

"What?"

"This is the last one. We've gotten our hands dirty more times than I can count. Murdered people, even. But this is the end. Both me and Kane are going to retire from this business. Use this money to start up a shop back home, or something. I'm going back to live with my family. I've been feeding 'em lies all this time, but now I can finally be beside them."

Rob looked at Kane, eyes wide as dinner plates.

"Sorry for not telling you ahead of time."

Kane did not sound the least bit apologetic.

"Argh! Leaving me out again!"

"Rob. You're young, but you were a pretty useful man to have around. If you plant to continue this line of work, remember what we taught you. Stick to those rules, and you'll minimize casualties on both sides. You'll be able to make a living off this for a long time, you hear?"

"Yes, sir!" Rob nodded forcefully and proudly, but he began to mumble about how he still felt slightly left out.

Kane suddenly smiled.

"Once we go our separate ways tonight, you'd better pretend not to notice us if you see us in town again. We'll both be using different names."

"Understood, Kane. Juan. Thank you for everything. Thank you. I mean it!"

"What're you doing, thanking a couple of bad guys? Just promise me you'll come buy something at my store." Juan chuckled.

"Then I'm expecting a discount." Rob laughed.

"Make lots of money and spend lots for our sakes." Kane said, also smiling.

"Two hundred." Hermes said.

At that very moment, the case Kane was carrying exploded.

A blast of flames erupted from either side and end of the case, along with countless tiny pieces of metal.

Kane, who was carrying the case, was thrown backwards. His body hit the top of a particularly large tree trunk, then fell onto the grass. His limbs and face were gone. The rest of his body did not so much as twitch.

Rob had been walking on Kane's right side when the explosion occurred. Having received a faceful of shrapnel, he screamed and leaned backwards in agony.

"Argh!"

As he fell to the ground, bright red blood spurted from his left wrist with the force of a fountain.

"Ugh! Gah! Ack! Argh!"

He floundered in pain for about eight seconds, clawing at the air. All of a sudden, he went quiet.

"..."

Juan, who had been standing behind the others at the moment of the explosion, had been knocked on his rear by the blast. For a moment, he looked down at his bloodied left arm with a look of utter shock. There was fire all around him. The bills that had been scattered into the air had caught fire, spreading it to the blades of grass. The forest grew a little brighter.

"So at the end of the end... huh." He muttered, for the last time.

The blood flowing from his chest would not stop. It continued to run down, not just his left arm, but from his torso down his legs.

The bearded man's legs finally gave away.

He collapsed into the bonfire of cash, exhaled loudly and for a long time as though he was snoring, and stopped moving.

Around the time the bills had mostly been burnt and the corpses were starting to fade into the dark, a headlight illuminated the bodies.

Kino lowered the side stand to prop up Hermes, turned on a flashlight, and looked down at the corpses with [Cannon] in hand.

"They're all dead."

"That was a pretty strong bomb, Kino."

"The employers wanted to kill these men, no matter what."

Still holding [Cannon] in her right hand, Kino removed her hat with her left, held it over her chest, and observed a moment of silence.

She soon opened her eyes, pushed her hat back over her head, and climbed onto Hermes. She then holstered [Cannon].

"Hm... How long do you think it'll take for us to get to that address they told us about?"

"Well... Once we make it out of the forest and onto the road, I don't think it'll take too long."

"Let's go, then."

Kino began to ride Hermes out of the forest.

"One more left." she said.

"Yeah. Just one more." Hermes agreed.

Just as the three corpses were again swallowed into darkness,

"..."

Elias was sitting backwards on his chair with his legs spread, wordlessly watching Sarah sleep in the bed she had taken over.

The curtains were closed, and a dim light hung from the ceiling.

Sarah was sleeping soundly, wrapped up in the blankets from back in the car. Elias's favorite blanket had been unceremoniously rolled up and left in a corner of the room.

"How much longer do I have to wait?" Elias mumbled. If all went according to plan, Rob would come by before dawn to pick up Sarah. That would be the end of Elias's part of the job. Then he would say goodbye to Sarah forever, never to meet again.

Elias again looked at the sleeping Sarah.

He looked at her slightly untidy red hair and her freckled face.

"..."

Eventually, Elias caught himself and shook his head.

"Wait, no! I'm supposed to like the Diva!"

And,

"Man..."

He sighed and bowed his head. He could feel the fatigue piling up.

"I can't doze off... Gotta stay awake..." He said, weakly lowering his head and falling asleep.

Time passed in silence.

A blinding flash of light lit up the room.

"Whoa!"

Elias was jolted awake by the beam of light. He raised his head and realized that the light had come from the headlights of a passing car. The light leaked onto the walls and floor from between the curtains, sliding away with the car behind it.

"They're here!" Elias cried, getting off his chair and opening the curtains a crack to peek outside.

There were shacks scattered by the roads. The streetlights and the moonlight were shining into the room. Elias spotted the headlights about fifty meters in the distance, parked in an alleyway.

The headlights went dark as Elias watched. Once the light was gone, he could see the car clearly.

"Wha-"

Elias gasped.

The headlights did not belong to Rob's car.

The car was blue, and stepping out of it were uniformed officers. The back doors opened. Four well-built men drew truncheons from their belts as they came onto the street. The white oaken clubs stood out brightly even in the dark.

"Th-they found us..."

Elias slowly looked around at his bed. The girl whose presence had brought the police here was still fast asleep.

Elias looked up and surveyed the situation from behind the curtain. The officers were not checking this particular shack yet. One of them knocked on a nearby door, and the owner of the house poked out his head with a clearly irritated look.

"So they don't know she's here. But... ..!"

Elias stood up.

"Wake up!" He whispered, rapping on Sarah's blankets.

Soon, Sarah opened her eyes slightly and looked at Elias.

"What is it?"

"G-get up! We gotta get out of here!"

"Why?"

"N-never mind, hurry!"

Elias could not think of any particular reason, but he took Sarah by the arm and yanked her to her feet. Her frilly pink dress caught his eye.

"Your dress is going to stand out too much..."

Elias quickly dove under his bed and took out some of his own clothes from a box. A pair of brown pants, a green jacket, and a shirt. He tossed them at Sarah.

"Change into those, quick!"

"Why?"

"Never mind that!" Elias cried loudly, perhaps almost loud enough for the officers in the streets to hear.

Intimidated by Elias's harsh tone, Sarah replied equally loudly.

"O-okay! Turn around!"

"Then please contact us if something should happen." The officers said to the pajama-clad house owner, and returned to the alley.

"Not this one, either. This is the sixth house--are you sure this is the right street?" One of the officers asked another. "Is the stolen 'Closet' really here?"

"I can't guarantee it's right, but we have to keep looking." Another officer replied. He then pointed at the shack where Elias's room was, now quite nearby. The room was dark.

"What about over there? There's another room."

"Oh, we can save that one for last."

The officer tilted his head in confusion at his co-worker's statement, and asked why that was the case.

"The only one living there's this kid named Elias. You don't see honest kids like him every day. He'd never go around stealing anything."

Hearing this, the officers headed to another house.

Watching them disappear--

"Now! Run for it!"

"What's going on here...?"

Elias and Sarah, who had changed out of her dress, rushed out from beside the shack and disappeared into the shadows. Elias held at his side a rolled-up blanket and a lunchbox-sized wooden case. Sarah was carrying a paper bag containing what remained of their bread.

It was midnight. The full moon shone brightly in the sky.

"That Elias kid wasn't in his room. I took a peek through the window, but there's nobody inside. No 'Closet', either."

"What, is he learning about the nightlife now? Let's go back."

The officers boarded their car and left the moonlit alley.

Just as the roar of the engine faded, a silhouette emerged from behind one of the shacks and briskly walked across the road.

It was Kino, wearing her hat and covering her face with a black cloth. She silenced her footsteps and approached the shack where Elias's room was.

She wordlessly drew [Woodsman] with her left hand. She disarmed the safety and lightly fingered the switch on the grip. A laser sight flashed to life, drawing a small red dot on the door.

Kino reached for the doorknob with her right hand and quietly turned it. The door was unlocked. [Woodsman] at the ready, she slowly pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

A small red dot appeared in the dark room lit only by the moonlight shining faintly through the curtains.

The table. The bed, and the space under it. The corners of the room. Behind the door.

There was nowhere for anyone to hide in this little room. Realizing no one was here, Kino switched off the laser sight. The red dot disappeared.

"Huh. Looks like I was a little too late." She mumbled.

"So as you can see, I lost them. Although I'm sure she was here until not too long ago."

"That's weird. I wonder if she noticed. What do we do, Kino?"

"We still have two days left."

Hermes was propped up on his center stand in the middle of the room. Kino took off the black cloth and her hat, and took a seat on the bed.

"I'm tired."

She plopped down onto the bed. Right beside her was the neatly folded pink dress she found tucked under the blanket. The moonlight dyed the frills a light blue.

"What are you going to do now, Kino? Go around everywhere looking for her?"

"No. They'll definitely hear if I try to chase them with you, Hermes. And if they've escaped into the sewers, that's not even an option. You wouldn't want to ride through a place like that. Would you, Hermes?"

"No way."

"That's it, then. I want to get some sleep now, so let's turn in for the night." Kino said, and laid down on the bed where Sarah had been not too long ago.

"Kino?"

"You never know--the culprit might return to the scene of the crime. So I'm going to rest up. I'll start looking again once the sun comes up."

"Okay. Also, this doesn't have much to do with me, but about your great hotel room--"

"Let's not talk about that."

"Okay, okay. I'll wake you up if anyone comes. Good night, Kino."

"Good night. ...I could've been sleeping at the hotel right about now..."

"Too bad, huh."

Elias and Sarah were under a small stone bridge.

Thanks to the moonlight, they had a clear view of the flowing creek and the fields spreading on either side of the bridge. They could hear the insects buzzing. They could hear frogs croaking. It was much cooler now than it was during the day.

They had run for a long time after escaping the shack. Or rather, they had not run for long. Sarah had quickly run out of breath. They tried to walk on-and-off, taking breaks in between, but soon Sarah fell to her knees at this particular place, far from any village.

Sarah only calmed down after taking in a handful of cold water from the creek. She leaned her head against the bridge and glanced over at Elias, who was sitting at her right side. It almost looked like she was glaring at him.

"Why did we have to run? Why? You said you'd let me go tonight or in the morning!"

"I don't know! The others never got back to me, but the police almost walked in on us."

He had come all this way without a clue as to what was going on. Not knowing what he should do next, all Elias could do was to answer Sarah weakly.

"If I'd known this would happen, I would have screamed for the officers to save me!"

"I-if you did that-"

"If I did?"

"I-I wouldn't let you get away with it!"

"Why you! I'm not scared of a little kid like you!"

"Then why didn't you just run off?!"

The conversation had degenerated an argument. Sarah responded harshly, giving no thought to Elias's position.

"I was just scared of that man with the beard! You don't scare me at all!"

"..."

"And one more thing! What are you going to do if a bad guy comes and attack us in a place like this?! Are you going to protect me from anything?!"

Although perhaps the act of raising her voice was more likely than anything to draw in hypothetical villains, Elias did not retort. He bowed his head weakly and buried his face in his knees.

Elias curled up into a ball in defeat.

"..."

Sarah said nothing more.

Elias fell asleep with his head still down. Sarah spoke to him a couple of times, but he did not respond.

Sarah watched him for a moment, then nonchalantly unfolded the blanket and spread half of it over Elias.

Sitting beside Elias, who did not seem likely to wake up anytime soon, Sarah covered herself with the remaining half of the blanket, closed her eyes, and drifted into sleep.

It was morning.

Dawn arrived with a chill on this autumn day.

The world was still enveloped in bluish darkness. It was completely silent--no birds, no breeze to sway the trees.

"Hm...?"

Elias opened his eyes and looked up. He then realized that he was sitting in the exact same place and position that he had been when he closed his eyes. And that there was a blanket spread over him.

"Whoa!"

He hurriedly looked to his left. There was no one there.

He looked to his right. There was no one there.

"No..."

Elias sadly got to his feet, choking down a sob. But at that very moment--

"Oh! You're awake!"

He heard a voice from overhead. He slowly looked up.

A pair of pigtails were hanging upside-down from the bridge. A freckled, upside-down face soon came into sight.

Elias looked up at her in a daze. Sarah spoke up energetically.

"What are we going to do today? You're going to do something, right?"

"Huh? Hey..."

Elias fell into confusion for a moment, but quickly thought of a plan. He then answered Sarah with a cheerful "Yeah!".

"We'll find the others and meet back up with them! They're not going to get caught easily. I'm sure they can tell us what to do! They'll be really happy that we didn't get caught by the police. And they'll let you go, Sarah!" He said.

Sarah pulled back her face and came down to the underside of the bridge. She stood before Elias.

"And?"

"Let's go! We'll look for the others!"

"How are we going to do that? This country's too big, and if we want to get around, we'll need money--"

"Don't worry about it!" Elias replied, looking down at the little wooden box he had taken from his room, now laying at his feet.

"..."

He then stomped down on it with all his might. The wood snapped and cracked as it gave way under Elias's heel.

As Sarah looked on, confused, Elias crouched down on the ground and began to pick up some small objects from the remains of the box. They were coins, just under twenty of them. Most of them were of a very low denomination.

"These are my savings. I was keeping it to buy something I really want. It's a whole lot of money, don't you think?"

Elias stood up and proudly showed off his life savings. It was enough money to feed them and allow them to travel for a few days, but it was almost too pitiful to call a nest egg.

"We'll buy breakfast with this and go by carriage!"

"...Is that all right?"

Instead of answering Sarah's question, Elias urged her to come along and began walking without looking back. He put his coins in the inside pocket of his jacket.

For a few seconds, Sarah stared at the pieces of the wooden box.

"..."

She then followed Elias out of the shadow of the bridge.

The sun was rising. Light began to fill the world.

Kino looked out the window, at the brightening streets, and whispered:

"Looks like I made the wrong move."

Kino was sitting on the old, messy bed, frowning.

"She's not coming back." Hermes said.

Kino got up and holstered [Woodsman], which she had been holding in her left hand all this time.

"Time for the next plan of action."

Time passed, and the sun finally emerged from below the horizon.

The world grew brighter and brighter, and the sky turned a paler shade of blue.

"This is definitely Rob's car."

Elias and Sarah were standing beside a black car parked in the woods, a little way into the forest after a curve in the road.

It was pure coincidence that they came by the vehicle. They had paid for a carriage ride in this general direction, assuming that the men had come this way. And when they spotted the car, they quickly disembarked from the horse-drawn carriage.

Elias tried to open the door, but it was locked.

"They said that they were going to meet up in the forest to get the money. Let's go look for them!" Elias said, after checking to make sure that there was no one in the car. He added that the others were perhaps in trouble.

Sarah nodded quietly with a defeated look. Then she said,

"But how? Where are we going to find them? There's nothing but trees all around us."

Elias looked around without a word. He then pointed to his right.

"Th-this way! I think."

Sarah sighed, knowing that Elias was choosing a direction at random.

"Let's go find them!"

But knowing that there was no use in trying to argue, she followed after Elias as he strode deeper into the woods.

And what they came across soon after...

Were three mangled corpses.

There was a loud shriek, sharp enough to shatter glass.

Elias and Sarah had almost simultaneously noticed the flock of birds ahead of them. They continued forward without stopping. The birds noticed their approach and scattered, revealing chunks of red on the ground. Just as they realized that the chunks of red were once human beings, they noticed a half-eaten, bearded face. It was Juan. Sarah screamed.

"..."

Elias looked upon the sight with his eyes wide, his teeth chattering.

Before him lay Juan's half-eaten head, a body that was missing its limbs and face, and Rob, the left side of his face burnt to cinder.

All around them were signs of extinguished fire. The remains of half-burned bills were scattered on the ground, wet with morning dew and mingling with the fallen leaves.

"Wh-why...? How?" Elias mumbled. Sarah's legs gave away. She sat there, legs only partially crossed.

The first words out of her mouth after her scream were:

"I knew it... I knew it..."

Hearing this, Elias slowly--very slowly--turned around towards Sarah. His arms and legs were still shaking, and he could feel his molars chattering against one another. But still he had to ask:

"...What do you mean, you knew?"

Sarah was clutching at her bangs. She screamed as though she did not even notice Elias.

"I knew it! They're trying to kill me! They want to kill me!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Because she's dead! That's why they want me dead too! They don't need me anymore! They don't need me, they don't need me!"

"Sarah...?"

"They don't need me anymore! They don't need me!" Sarah repeated. Looking at the raw force with which she grasped at her hair, Elias realized that she was not answering his question.

"..."

He then turned towards Juan once more. The shaking had stopped. The bearded man's face was mangled entirely from the nose upwards, indistinguishable from other masses of flesh.

Elias grimly looked down.

"..."

He spotted a black object in the right side of Juan's jacket.

"They don't need me anymore..."

Ignoring Sarah, who continued to ramble in shock, Elias drew closer to Juan. He took about seven steps to stand just before the corpse.

"I... have to protect her..." Elias mumbled, looked down at Juan's remains.

He crouched down and slowly reached out towards Juan's inside pocket. The blood stank. Elias took hold of the object and pulled it out.

He exhaled and looked directly upon it.

It was a thin automatic persuader equipped with a silencer. He took it in his right hand, and found that his fingers could reach the trigger--likely because the grip was so narrow.

Elias disarmed the safety with his left hand and raised his right arm. He took aim at a tree trunk, in the deserted woods. When he pulled the trigger, there was a tiny sound as a bullet was launched into approximately the spot he had been aiming for. Elias felt a slight recoil running up his arm. A gold-colored shell casing flew towards his right side.

"..."

Although he twitched for a moment as he pulled the trigger, Elias soon took a firm hold on his new weapon.

After many failed attempts, he finally set the safety again. He then searched Juan's inside pocket again with his left hand. He found two heavy spare magazines, filled with ammunition.

In his right hand was the persuader, and in his left were the magazines. Elias got to his feet.

At almost exactly the same time, the sun emerged over the canopy. The trees cast long shadows upon the ground.

Elias turned to Sarah, who was still sitting on the ground.

"Let's run for it!"

There was someone looking at Elias from behind a lens marked with crosshairs.

There was someone in the woods, across a creek several hundred meters away, holding Elias at the centre of the crosshairs in the magnified image.

"I knew it. The culprit always returns to the scene of the crime."

"Where'd you get that line from?"

"When was it...? I read it in a book somewhere. 'The Murder of something-or-other'."

"That doesn't sound fun. Anyway, aren't you the culprit this time, Kino? And one more thing--"

Kino was the person who had been watching Elias.

"I can't believe you're using a motorrad as a persuader stand. Why don't you just use a tripod?"

Kino was wearing her black jacket, using Hermes (propped up on his center stand) to support [Flute]. She was sitting on one knee, aim set on her target.

She was looking into the scope with her right eye, with her left eye still open. She had slightly bent back the brim of her hat to keep it out of her way.

"I'd rather not. The ground's still covered with dew, so I'll get soaked if I lie on my stomach." Kino replied.

"You'd make a real sniper cry with that attitude, Kino." Hermes said, astonished.

Kino and Hermes were in a wood hundreds of meters away, with a bog between them and Elias. It was an incredibly perfect position, where they could see the three corpses in between the trees. It was also the only point from which Kino could snipe her target. The ground was carpeted with dry leaves.

She had covered Hermes with several branches to keep him hidden. Likewise, she covered [Flute]'s barrel and her hat with leaves for camouflage.

"Anyway, looks like all this waiting was good for something after all."

The boy at the center of the crosshairs moved. The sun rose and illuminated the area, making his form clear. He was now searching a corpse's pockets and removing a wallet.

"So the boy's with her after all. Then I guess they must've been lying when they said that they threatened him."

"I think it's more like they tricked him into doing this job."

Kino continued adjusting the crosshairs, following after the boy. Her index finger reached out towards the trigger, but did not yet make contact with it.

Behind the boy, the girl was sitting helplessly on the ground. They were both of a similar build, but Kino could identify her by her pigtails.

"Don't get confused and pull the trigger too early by accident, Kino. They're both around the same size." Hermes whispered.

"Don't worry. In cases like this, the one holding the persuader is the criminal and the one without it is the hostage."

"Well, that makes this a lot easier."

"That persuader uses .22 LR rounds. Maybe I should take his ammunition later. Anyway, right now, they're slightly overlapping. I don't think I can make the shot without it ricocheting off bone and hitting something I don't want to hit."

Kino said, adjusting her position again. The boy got up after searching the corpse.

"And if I miss my first shot, they might end up ducking. Then that would be a real headache. I have to finish this in one shot..."

The boy walked over beside the girl and said something. They were no longer overlapping in Kino's sight. She could finally take aim properly.

Kino's finger touched the trigger.

She took a deep breath and stilled herself.

Kino adjusted the crosshairs slightly, targeting the child's chest. And--

All of a sudden, everything went dark.

"?"

Kino opened her left eye, taken by surprise. An unusual sight unfolded before her.

A little bird was resting at the end of [Flute]'s barrel.

"Hey, move." Kino whispered, lightly shaking [Flute]. The bird flew off about three seconds later. But--

"Not again."

By the time Kino looked into the scope again, the children's silhouettes had overlapped again as they disappeared beyond the woods.

Kino sighed and raised [Flute]. Leaves fluttered down from her head and the barrel.

"You lost them again, Kino?"

Kino, who had been sitting on one knee, plunked down onto the ground.

"I could go after them if you could drive over wetland, Hermes."

"You know I can't do that."

Kino sighed again.

"They wouldn't go back to their hideout now. So they might end up going to another slum. It's going to be hard to track them down once they disappear into a crowd..."

"You might not end up finishing the job by tomorrow night."

"I want to avoid that at all costs." Kino said, arming the safety and getting to her feet.

"Whew... there."

Kino looked at Hermes. "What was that?"

"I was speaking on your behalf, Kino. It sounded like something you'd say once you got tired." Hermes answered impishly.

It was around noon. The midday sun gently shone over the slums as Elias and Sarah ran through the streets.

Elias, who had holstered the persuader on his belt, hidden under his jacket, was pulling Sarah along by hand.

"We should be safe here. They'll never find us if we hide in the crowds. Let's go into one of the alleys."

They had taken a carriage here from the forest. And all this time, the only thing Sarah said was:

"They don't need me... they don't need me..."

She muttered the same words to herself over and over again, her head bowed and her eyes locked on the ground.

Shops were lined on either side of the street. Many people were going to and fro. One shop caught Elias's eye, so he bought bread and water with the bills he found on Kane's corpse. The bills were of a large denomination, so his pockets were now full of change.

Elias dove into an alleyway, carrying the bag with the bread and the bottled water, and found the deserted remains of a demolished building. It was a ruin in the shape of a house.

Dragging Sarah along, Elias climbed over the stone foundation and entered. He sat down on the foundation and pulled Sarah over to seat her beside him.

After drinking some water, he offered Sarah some bread. But she ignored him. Elias put the bread back into the paper bag.

Several seconds of silence later, Sarah began muttering again.

"They don't need me... They want me to die."

"Why are you saying that?! If your parents--I mean, the adults you live with are rich, why would they throw you away?! We'd bring you back once they pay, so why would they leave you?!" Elias said in one breath, finally getting his questions off his chest. Sarah looked up and yelled back at him.

"Because they don't need me anymore! Because I'm useless now!" She answered. But Elias did not understand what she meant. He frowned.

"What's that supposed to--"

"Hey!"

Another voice interrupted Elias's question. Elias flinched and turned around at the source of the voice.

Standing there were five boys in their late teens. They were clearly delinquent young men living in the alleys.

" ... "

Elias said nothing. The boys stepped onto the foundation. The tall boy at the center of the group, who looked the most mature, looked to be the leader. He was chewing on an unlit cigarette, looking unlikely to be there on friendly terms.

"You're a new face." The boy said, slowly drawing near. Elias took to his feet.

"Wh-what do you want?" He asked brusquely, briefly glancing at Sarah.

"What do we want', you idiot? Who the hell do you think we are?!" One of the boys beside the leader cried in a loud voice. The others followed suit.

"Yeah! Head on the floor, now!"

"This is our turf. Who gave you permission to come here?!"

The boys began taunting Elias loudly, their demands not always making sense. But their purpose was clear--they were trying to break his spirit.

"..."

Elias looked at the five boys dazedly.

"What? You want me to beat you to a pulp?"

Elias's eye slowly grew wide. Flashing before his eyes was not the sight of the five boys, but the chunks of meat that had once been Juan.

Somewhat surprised that Elias was not so easily intimidated, the four boys strode up towards him.

"Say something, why don't you!" The boys cried, and shoved the smaller Elias forward without giving him time to respond.

"Whoa! Ugh!"

Elias's back hit the ground, littered with little stones. A look of pain spread over his face.

The other boy approached Sarah, who sat unresponsively with her head bowed. He violently grabbed her by the arm and forced her face upwards.

"I knew it! It's a girl! Hey, guys! Look what we have here!" The boy said, sounding strangely excited at Sarah's unreceptive expression. The boy forced her to her feet and took her by the shoulders.

"Kid! I'm gonna borrow the girl for a bit!" He said, and looked over at their leader.

"She's pretty cute! We should make her our girlfriend!"

"Our girlfriend'? Sure, the Boss gets her first. But I should be second, right?"

The five boys began chatting amongst themselves, dragging Sarah away by her shoulders.

At that very moment--

"Stop."

Elias's voice reached them from behind.

"What?!" One of the boys yelled menacingly. The boys all turned to face Elias, who was looking at them with empty eyes.

"Kid, was that you making noise just now?"

Elias nodded slowly.

"That's right. Please don't take that girl away."

The leader shook his head slightly, signaling his cronies.

"What, you want a piece of this?" One of the boys said, stepping towards Elias. There was a cracking noise as he flexed his knuckles.

The boy had taken about three steps when Elias took out Juan's keepsake from his pocket. He disarmed the safety.

"I have to protect that girl. I made a promise to someone... Someone who's not here anymore. I promised. I swore. He trusted me to keep her safe."

Elias looked at the boy, then to Sarah, who still stood with her head bowed. Elias looked as though he was on the verge of tears.



"H-hey! Is that a persuader?!"

The boy stopped in his tracks.

"The kid's just bluffing! That's probably just a toy!"

"Then take that away, too!"

The other boys cried irresponsibly from behind him.

The leader waved his right arm.

"Take care of him quick. And bring that toy back."

A second later, there was a hole gaping in his arm.

The sound of the gunshot was nearly inaudible. Only the footsteps of the boy approaching Elias sounded, the noise of gravel under shoe.

"Huh?"

The leader turned his face and gaze towards his right side. He raised his left hand and brought his fingers to his right arm.

"Huh?"

He was bleeding. A crimson stain was spreading over his sleeve.

"Huh? Wha... ARGH!"

Pain shot through his body in a moment's notice. He finally realized that he had been shot. The leader pressed down on his arm and fell to his knees.

"He shot me... Damn it! He shot me!"

He began with a mumble and ended with a scream.

The looks on the boys' faces changed instantly. The boy approaching Elias in particular quickly looked around, noticed his friends gathering around the leader, and turned tail. In other words, he fled.

Elias approached the five boys, steadily gripping the persuader with both hands. The boys crowded together in one mass, and exchanged glances. They looked at Elias as though one would a monster.

Elias drew three meters closer. The persuader was trained on the boys.

"Leave. Please."

The four boys nodded, grabbing their wincing leader by his armpits and feet.

"Argh! That hurts! Stop, you bastards! Let me down!"

The boys ignored their leader's cries and fled with him.

When the boys disappeared, Elias armed the safety on his persuader.

He placed it back in his pocket without a word, and took Sarah's hand as she stood there like a silent ghost.

"Let's go. I'll listen to your story later."

He began to walk in the opposite direction from the five boys.

It was just past noon.

The sun shone in the sky, neither too strong nor weak. But the clouds in the west were growing darker. The wind was blowing to the east. It was an autumn afternoon that would clearly give way to bad weather.

"A boy about twelve years old and a girl with pigtails? And they're both a complete mess? Why, in these streets, you see children like that everywhere." A woman replied to the traveler on the motorrad. She soon disappeared into the crowds with a mountain of laundry balanced in a basket on her head.

They were in the middle of the slums. Kino, wearing a long coat and riding a motorrad, stuck out like a sore thumb.

"If they came this way... This is the only slum here. Finding them is not going to be easy. And there's no use asking people, either..." Kino said. Hermes, who was not currently running, agreed.

On Hermes's luggage seat was [Flute], dismantled and wrapped up in cloth.

What would Kino do next, he asked her.

"I'm getting kind of hungry... Maybe I should just forget this job."
Kino replied.

"Already?!"

"But Hermes..."

"No 'but's! Even the worst marksman in the world's bound to hit something eventually if he keeps on shooting! Go on and ask someone else. All great investigations are built on gathering information."

Kino complained, muttering something about how Hermes never got his expressions mixed up at times like this. She made to start his engine again, but noticed something.

"Hm?"

Kino caught a glimpse of a boy sitting on the street, a thin stream of blood trickling down his arm. Around him were four other boys, watching him worriedly at best and having no idea as to how to help him at the worst.

"..."

Kino stepped off from Hermes. She pushed him alongside her as she approached the boys.

The boy who had been shot had folded back his sleeve, looking down at his wound irritably. He applied pressure to the little wound, and when it seemed the bleeding had stopped he let go of it. Then it would start bleeding again, so he would apply pressure again. His pale face was dotted with cold sweat.

"You might die at this rate!" "Let's go to a hospital!" "Call the cops!" The boys cried. Kino drew closer, pushing Hermes along. She lowered his center stand with a clack.

"Excuse me."

Only after she spoke to them did the boys notice Kino.

"Wh-what? Whaddaya want?" One of the boys asked. The boy who was pressing down on his own arm also looked up.

"That wound was from a persuader, correct? It looks like a low-speed .22 caliber round. And it's fresh." Kino said calmly. There was not a hint of pity in her voice as she spoke to the injured boy.

"Yeah, so what?" The leader retorted, desperately trying to maintain an air of authority despite the pain and the cold sweat running down his face.

"Could you tell me who it was that shot you?"

"I-it's got nothing to do with you!"

"Was it, by any chance, a boy around twelve years old with a girl who had her hair in pigtails?"

The atmosphere froze over instantly. The boys simultaneously went silent.

"Looks like Kino was right on the money. As lucky as ever, huh?" Hermes mused excitedly.

Kino asked the dazed boys--the injured one in particular--about when, where and how the boy was shot.

The leader, who had been silent for some time, blurted out:

"What's that got to do with you?! I don't feel like talking. Get outta my face!"

"That was a big mistake. You shouldn't have said that. Kino's really hungry, you know." Hermes said. The boy quickly lost his spirit.

"Wh-what--"

And when Kino drew [Woodsman] with her left hand and pointed it at his face, the boy went so far as to feel terror.

"I'm sorry. I don't really like having to do this with a persuader, but I'd like to get this job over with as quickly as I can. Would you mind if I shot you if you can't answer my questions?" Kino asked, as calm as though she were asking for directions. The boy desperately shook his head.

"Please... Don't! No!"

"Sweet! Spit it out, then, baby! You know I get really impatient when I haven't had my lunch!" Hermes said.

Kino glanced at the trembling boys.

"..."

She then smacked Hermes's fuel tank with her right hand.

"Ouch."

Elias and Sarah had left the slums and were now walking along a road that stretched between two fields.

Sarah was still walking with her head bowed, and Elias was leading her by the hand. There was almost no one on the road, which ran in a straight line. The only people they saw were a few workers in the fields in the distance, where the harvests had already taken place.

"There! Let's hitch a ride and get somewhere--somewhere safe!"

Elias desperately waved his arms at the first vehicle on the road in a long time--a small truck.

Behind the wheel, on the right side of the truck, was a woman--a gentle-looking farmer. She sat with the window wide open and her arm on the frame. She stopped her truck at the side of the road beside Elias and Sarah, and poked her head outside.

"What is it?"

"Please help us. We have to get somewhere quickly. We don't have a lot of money, but we'll pay you! Please give us a lift!"

Seeing Elias's desperation and the coin he held in his hand, the woman thought for a moment and asked him if a ride to the next village was all right with him.

"That's fine with us! Thank you so much, ma'am! We're really grateful!" Elias said, repeating himself several times. He opened the door on the passenger side, had Sarah climb into the truck first, and followed after her.

Once the door slammed shut, the truck slowly began to move down the road.

Elias handed the coin to the woman and thanked her.

"All right, I'll take it." The woman said, accepting the coin. "I don't know if you're running away from home or something, but I won't ask questions. I was quite the troublemaker myself when I was your age." She said with a wink. Elias thanked her again.

It was not long after they began to drive off that the woman slowed down slightly.

It was almost at that exact moment that they heard the roar of another engine in the distance.

The sound went from behind them on the right side to beside them, and then ahead of them on their right side. In other words, it passed the truck.

Elias spotted a motorrad in front of them, through the dirty windshield. The motorrad's silver fuel tank had a dull sheen to it. The rider wore a black jacket and a hat with a brim and ear flaps. On the luggage seat behind the rider was an object wrapped up in a brown coat.

The rider glanced backwards, meeting eyes with Elias from behind a pair of goggles.

"If you're going to pass me, then you could at least go a little faster." The woman complained, but the motorrad continued to drive in front of the truck at the same speed.

"It can't be..." Elias mumbled, frowning. At that very moment, the rider's left hand let go of the motorrad and pulled a persuader from their back.

Not too long ago:

"Isn't that them over there?"

"I think so."

Hermes and Kino said, riding down a road with fields on either side.

Ahead of them was parked a small truck. They could see a boy and a girl climbing aboard. Although it was quite far, Kino could see the girl's pigtails.

"A boy and a pigtailed girl. Just like they said." Kino said, twisting the throttle to speed up. She glanced back to make sure no other cars were coming up on the road, and began to follow after the truck. She then passed it.

"I'd better check to make sure I have the right person. I'd hate to end up with a case of mistaken identity." Kino said, slowing down as soon as she passed the truck. She kept pace with it and slowly looked back.

Behind the dirty windshield she could see a girl with pigtails and a boy. His eyes met Kino's. They looked at one another for about two seconds.

"Don't blame me for this, okay?"

Kino looked around again to make sure that there were no cars ahead of her. She then took her left hand off the handlebar and drew [Woodsman] from behind her back.

She quickly disarmed the safety, steered Hermes to the right side of the front of the truck, and opened fire.

The round shot straight into the side-view mirror on the driver's side. Sparks flew from the impact.

"Eeek!"

The woman's face was overcome by terror.

"Stop!" Kino yelled as loudly as she could.

"EEEEEEK!"

The woman's foot left the gas pedal.

"DON'T STOP!" Elias cried, drawing his persuader with his right hand and pointing it at the woman. At the same time, he pushed down Sarah's head with his left hand, making it look like he was forcing her to bow.

The moment the woman spotted the persuader next to her face and stared down the barrel, she was again overcome by fear.

"Don't stop! Keep going! Hit the gas now! Go!" Elias yelled, his eyes bulging.

"EEEAAARRRRRGH!"

The woman slammed her foot down on the gas pedal, driven by fear of the persuader aimed at her head.

The truck's engine roared as the vehicle sped up violently, clunking and clattering on its way.

"Huh?" Hermes said, having been overtaken by the truck.

"Looks like they're desperate, too." Kino said, holstering [Woodsman]. The truck sped up so much that it was looking likely to break down from the strain.

Kino took the handlebar with her left hand again.

"What now, Kino?" Hermes asked.

"I thought about shooting the tires, but I can't get a bystander involved."

"So?"

"Now that I know they're on that truck, I just have to keep following after them until they get tired and stop."

"All right."

"To be honest, I just want to leave this to the police already." Kino complained, and began to follow after the truck again. She kept a slight distance so that the boy could not aim at her out the window.

"Wh-what is this...? Please stop... I can't take it!" The woman said, chocking down sobs as she continued driving.

"Shut up shut up shut up! Keep driving, or I'll shoot!" Elias cried mercilessly, keeping his persuader trained on the woman. Sarah sat between them with her head bowed, still as a corpse.

Once the truck had reached a certain speed, it only got louder, not faster. Elias glanced at the side-view mirror on his left. The motorrad was following them at a steady pace.

"Damn it!"

Elias turned, and pointed the persuader out the window. The moment he took aim, the motorrad slipped away from sight.

"Not good, not good, not good..." Elias shook his head over and over again.

"Wh-what do I do?!" The woman screamed, almost in tears.

"Keep driving!" Elias replied reflexively. He mumbled to himself, "At this rate..."

He looked in the side-view mirror again. The pursuer was in sight once more.

Elias looked ahead. There was a shallow river before them, perpendicular to the road. The road led to a bridge about ten meters ahead.

"Swerve to the right just before the bridge!"

"What?"

"You heard me!"

The woman slammed on the brakes. The truck slowed down at once. Elias desperately clung to Sarah as she fell forwards.

The truck came to a stop before the bridge and swerved to the left. It then began driving along the riverbank, which was just wide enough to accommodate a single vehicle.

Elias poked his head out the window to check the view behind them. The motorrad had swerved, and was right on their heels.

"I bet a motorrad won't be able to cross a river..."

The truck continued chugging down the rough riverbank. Only a single meter to their right was the river's edge, lined with medium-sized rocks.

"Faster! Keep going!"

The truck drove at full throttle for several seconds, far enough that they could no longer see the road behind them--far enough that all around them was nothing but fields.

"Please, go down to the river!" Elias said, his tone a little less harsh than before.

"Wh-what?!" The woman said.

"Get down to the river and cross it in one go! I'm sure a truck could manage that! I've seen a freight truck do it before! Once we get that motorrad off our tail, we'll get off! We'll get out of your way! So please!"

The woman spun the steering wheel to the right, irritated.

"Oh, I don't even know anymore!"

The truck tipped slightly to the side as it slid down the slope, descending on the verge of tipping over completely. It then drove across the pebble-lined riverbed, shaking violently.

The truck then charged into the river with a great splash. It drove through the water. The tires spun helplessly several times over wet rock. The roar of the engine grew exponentially louder. The truck slowed down for a moment, then found traction again and sped up, sputtering ahead.

Splashing and sloshing, shaking left and right, the truck crossed the river at a slight angle. The tires were almost completely submerged, and water was splashing into the seats through the open windows.

"Faster! Faster!" Elias cried. The woman stepped down even more on the gas pedal, now in a state of half-surrender. The truck finally made it across the river. It sped up to climb the riverbank in one go, almost flying over the riverbank and landing in the field, but it just managed to avoid such a fate.

"Yeah! We have to get away now, ma'am! Into the field!"

After driving a short distance, the truck swerved into the fields. It headed for the woods ahead, leaving the river behind.

"That's not good. I underestimated them." Kino said in a defeated tone, watching the truck drive away.

"I can't believe they crossed the river with a truck that small. They'd have gotten water in the exhaust pipe if the driver was even a little late with the gas pedal. I top my hat to that driver." Hermes said.

Kino looked up. Clouds were looming overhead, thicker than before.

"You mean, you 'tip your hat', right?"

"Yeah, that's it!" Hermes said.

The motorrad and the rider stood there on the riverbank.

"We could've gone after them if you were better at crossing unpaved roads, Hermes."

"Don't blame the motorrad. You could've just shot the tires from the start."

But there was no use crying over spilled milk.

"We lost them."

"We lost them, huh."

Kino and Hermes accepted their situation and thought of their next course of action.

"We should go back to the bridge, cross the river, and follow the tire tracks."

"I guess we should."

At the edge of a coniferous forest, bordering the fields.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Please, take this. I know it won't make up for what I did, but..." Elias trailed off, and held out all the bills he had in his pocket. It was the money he had taken from the corpse. Not a single one of the bills was stained with blood.

"..."

The woman, sitting in the driver's seat, looked down at the apologetic Elias. She then looked over at Sarah, who had remained silent with her head bowed this whole time.

"Are you going to have any money for yourself if you give me this?" The woman asked, sounding slightly upset.

"No..."

"What are you going to do now?"

"We're going to run away together."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure. But I have to protect her. I made a promise!"

"Well... Then you can keep the money."

"What? But-"

"No 'but's!" The woman cried angrily, and suddenly smiled. "I don't know if you're running away from home or something, but I won't ask questions. I was quite the troublemaker myself when I was your age. Not to this degree, though." She grinned and winked.

Elias thanked the woman and apologized to her over and over again. The woman started the truck.

Leaving the children behind, the truck disappeared into the distance at the same speed at which it had been fleeing before.

Clouds were looming overhead, thicker than before. The wind grew stronger.

"Let's go, Sarah." Elias said to the girl who stood with her head bowed.

"..."

Sarah did not answer. But she followed after Elias when he led her away by hand.

The trees stood at regular intervals next to one another, like a grid. Elias and Sarah stepped into the dark woods, leaving behind footprints in the soft earth.

"Here they are. Tire tracks and two small sets of footprints."

"Sure looks like it."

Kino and Hermes spoke in front of the forest. Hermes was propped up on his center stand, and Kino was crouching beside the footprints.

The sky was now half-covered in rainclouds. The sun, which should have been halfway to the western horizon, was nowhere to be seen.

"You wait here, Hermes. I'll try going after them as far as I can." Kino said, checking to see that Hermes was securely on his center stand. She then untied the elastic wires on the luggage seat.

Wrapped up in her brown coat was the dismantled [Flute]. Kino put the front and back pieces together and locked them into place, then hooked the shoulder strap onto the front piece. She left the cylindrical silencer, which would be attached to the side of the front, because it would make the persuader too long and unwieldy. Finally, she opened the covers from either end of the telescopic sight.

Kino rolled up her brown coat and tied it to the luggage seat. She took out four magazines from the side boxes, each loaded with nine rounds, and put three magazines' worth into the pouches on her belt. The last magazine Kino loaded into [Flute].

"I'll be back. Even if I don't find them, I'll make it back by nightfall." Kino said, raising [Flute] to eye-level.

"You're not hunting deer this time, so don't slice them to pieces after you shoot, Kino." Hermes joked.

Kino pulled the bolt handle with her right hand.

"All right. I'll be careful."

She then released the handle. There was a cold, metallic clack as the high-speed rifle round, powerful enough to shatter half of a human head, was loaded from the magazine into the firing chamber.

"See you soon."

Kino started, holding [Flute] before her and following the footprints by sight.

"See you, Kino. I don't need any souvenirs, okay?" Hermes said, as she disappeared into the forest.

"Aw, man. I'm bored." He mumbled to himself, as soon as Kino was out of sight.

"Already?!" Kino exclaimed from somewhere in the darkness.

Inside the overgrown forest was an old bridge spanning a narrow creek, long since out of use. It was made of several logs fastened together, just wide enough for two people to cross simultaneously.

Elias and Sarah were under the mossy log bridge, sitting by the dark creek.

"Under a bridge again, huh?" Elias smiled. But Sarah wouldn't look up, let alone react.

Elias thought for a moment, then finally spoke as though having reached a decision.

"Sarah! Please tell me." He said, taking hold of her shoulders. Sarah flinched. "Why did the adults taking care of you abandon you? You know the answer, right? Tell me."

"..."

Sarah looked up and met Elias's eyes. She had a dead look in her expression, devoid of strength.

"It's better you don't know..." Sarah mumbled weakly, speaking for the first time in a long time. She repeated herself once more. "It's better you don't know, Ellie."

Elias tilted his head for a moment, and realized something.

"It's Elias!"

"...Huh?"

"My name. My real name is Elias. 'Ellie's just a fake name Juan came up for me. It sounds kinda similar anyway, though. Anyway, from now on, you can call me 'Elias'."

"..."

Sarah looked at Elias's serious expression in a daze. Her eyes very slightly narrowed in a curve. She was not smiling, but her expression grew softer.

"You're so weird... What kind of kidnapper tells his name to his hostage...? You're a weirdo..."

"That doesn't matter. So please, tell me. Please."

"..."

Sarah met Elias's eyes in silence.

She then nodded lightly.

Sarah gently took hold of Elias's hands, which were still on her shoulders. She slowly took them away.

Getting to her feet, Sarah bowed forward to avoid hitting her head on the log bridge and stepped out to its side.

The sky was grey and the forest was dark, but light shone down where Sarah stood. Elias looked up at Sarah from under the bridge.

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you why they abandoned me." She said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Sarah began to sing.

Kino was cautiously walking through the woods, following the footprints.

She held [Flute] in her hands, checking through her scope to see if there were any enemies lying in wait for an ambush and doing her best to keep an eye out so she would not lose track of the footprints.

There was still a great deal of distance between Kino and the children. So the song did not reach Kino.

Sarah was singing.

She sang in the deserted woods, with Elias alone as her audience.

It was a beautiful, clear voice.

The lyrics spoke of wanting to hold close the feeling of being in love with someone. It was a typical ballad, but that was exactly what highlighted her incredible capacity and skill.

" ... "

Elias gaped as he listened, as though he could not believe his ears.

The song Sarah sang was a familiar one, one he had heard many times over on the radio--the unmistakeable song of the Diva.

Things had begun one day earlier.

Kino, who was now searching the forest, and Hermes, who was complaining at the edge of the woods("I'm bored..."), were surrounded by men in suits.

They were in the restaurant of the hotel Kino was staying at. Kino sat at a table near the center of the room, with the suit-clad men. There were no other patrons. Even the hotel employees had been sent away.

"So what you're saying is that you want me to kill the kidnappers?" Kino asked. The men nodded gravely. One in particular spoke up.

"That's correct. Although normally we would pay the ransom and wait for the kidnappers to release the hostage, circumstances are different this time."

"How?" Hermes asked, propped up behind the table. The man answered.

"I suppose there's no merit to lying, so let me tell you the truth. But you must promise us that you will not speak a word of it to the people of this land."

"Of course. We'll be leaving this country in two days anyway."

"Then let me explain. The girl who has been kidnapped is no ordinary young lady. She holds information from our company that is strictly confidential. We suspect that the kidnappers did not know this when they took her, thinking that perhaps she was just the daughter of a wealthy family. We had given her minimal security detail to make her less conspicuous, but never did we expect that something like this would happen."

"So what is that confidential info? A secret?"

"It's best that neither of you know, Hermes."

"I'm not very curious myself, so I won't ask. But there's something else I would like to know. If I kill the kidnappers as you ask of me, then the hostage will be in danger as well. Is that all right with you?"

It was a natural question to ask. The men, however, said nothing.

"Oh."

"I see."

Kino and Hermes understood at once. Hermes spoke up.

"Looks like you want to silence her, right? You want the hostage to die. You're telling Kino to kill the kidnappers, but what you really want is to kill the girl." Hermes said nonchalantly. "If Kino attacks the kidnappers and makes a big show of it, the kidnappers are going to get scared and kill the hostage to get away. That's what you want to happen, right? You want her to die with your information, but nobody wants to get their hands dirty--or maybe you just feel bad about it. So that's why you hired Kino to 'kill the kidnappers', right?"

The men remained silent, essentially confirming Hermes's suspicions.

Kino sighed.

"That reminds me of one of Master's stories. It's almost scary how similar it is..." She mumbled to herself, looking at the quiet men.

Kino decided to ask a direct question.

"I can't say I understand everything, but what are you offering me in exchange for this job?"

"..."

The men said nothing, but took out a small box--a wooden box about the size of a coffee mug. They placed it on the table and opened the lid.

"..."

Kino shut her mouth as soon as she caught a glimpse of its contents. The man adjusted the angle of the box so that Hermes could also see.

"Whew!" Hermes cried, trying to make a sound like he was whistling.

The box was full of gemstones, the traveler's best friend--small, lightweight, and expensive, they were perfect for travelers as replacement currency.

"If you should successfully complete this mission, we will give you this entire box. All of it."

"That reminds me of one of Master's stories..." Kino mumbled. "It's a very attractive offer. But I'm afraid I can't agree with the contents of the job."

The men were taken aback.

"Then what do you say to a little extra?" They said, placing onto the table a small metallic object that could fit in the palm of one's hand.

Kino's mouth closed shut once more.

"Wow, that's amazing." Hermes said, a little theatrically but nonetheless sincerely impressed.

"We've gathered some information about your repeated visits to different automobile repair stores upon your arrival--you're looking for a replacement for an old part from Hermes's engine, correct? Unfortunately, you will be unable to get a hold of that part in our country without ordering a custom version. Which will undoubtedly cost a fortune."

"Yes, but..." Kino trailed off.

"You're right on the money. So what do we do now?" Hermes wondered.

"You could very well give up on acquiring the part here and put your hopes in your next country, correct?" The man asked. Kino nodded.

"But there is no guarantee that you'll find it at your next stop. And what if you do find the part, but at a very steep price? What if there will be a long wait before you can finally receive the part? If you can get your hands on it here and now, you won't have any such worries."

"That's true."

"Would this still not be enough for you?"

"..."

Kino went silent.

"I'm all for it, but it's your choice, Kino." Hermes said casually.

Soon, the song that captivated Elias's senses as it spread through the woods came to an end.

Sarah breathed lightly and opened her eyes.

She looked at Elias, looking at her in a daze, and laughed out loud for the first time in a long time.

"How? ...That's the Diva's song. But... Why?" Elias gapes. Sarah stood next to him, speaking quietly.

"You know, there's actually no such thing."

"What? What does that mean...? Huh?"

"There are actually two fake Divas, that's all. One is the girl that appears in pictures, radio shows, and movies, pretending to sing."

"..."

"And the other one--" Sarah smiled sadly, a shadow cast over her freckled face.

"The girl that sings. That's me."

"..."

"I'm actually an orphan. I don't remember because I was little, but they found me abandoned at a church. A philanthropist raised me after that. I heard that I was always a great singer, even when I was little. All I remember is singing."

"..."

"The auditions they held for the Diva two years ago was all fake. The girls who tried really hard to win never had a chance to begin with. They decided from the start that they would choose the cute, beautiful girl who looked like a doll. But she couldn't sing as well as I could."

"So that's why you sang. You're the singing Diva."

"That's right. They knew from the start that I was going to sing. That girl's voice was really similar to mine, too. I don't look as pretty as she does, and I don't have her beautiful hair. Whoever heard of a freckled prima donna? But you know, that girl told me: 'I can't sing like you can. So this is enough. The two of us are one. Let's do our best together'. Afterwards, we became one Diva. We worked hard to give the people energy and laughter. It was all so fun, and the adults cheered us on. Because they needed us."

Elias realized that tears were flowing from Sarah's eyes. The drops slid down her cheeks and fell from her chin. But they did not continue for long.

"So why did they abandon you, Sarah? You're so important to them!" Elias said angrily. Sarah's answer was short.

"Because she's gone."

"What?"

"The other Diva passed away. Did you notice how they stopped putting out any new pictures of her? Do you understand now?"

"Oh! No way..."

Elias was suddenly reminded of Juan's words. His expression stiffened.

"She's been sick for a long time now. So she was resting. She told me she was going to be fine, that nothing was going to happen... But that wasn't true after all."

"Oh..."

Elias stood up, stepping out from under the bridge and into the light. The woods were dyed grey, the color of the layers of clouds hanging over the sky.

"She's dead. She must have died when I was kidnapped. That's why they don't need me anymore. They don't need a 'me', because what they needed was 'us'."

Elias drew closer to Sarah, who spoke indifferently.

"That's why they're going to kill me. Because I know the secret that could cause so much trouble if people found out. They killed the bearded man because they wanted to get the kidnappers angry so they would kill me."

"..."

"That way, they wouldn't have to kill me themselves. They're all too nice to want to kill me with their own hands. But I don't want to die. I don't. I want to live." Sarah said with a smile. Elias held out his hands towards her.

"You're not going to die. There's no way I'd leave you." Elias said, embracing her.

He held her tightly in his arms, pulling in her pigtailed head.

"Don't worry, Sarah. I'm going to keep you safe."

"Even though I'm not your hostage anymore?" Sarah asked weakly, burying her face in his chest.

"I'm not protecting a 'half-Diva' or a hostage. I'm going to protect you, Sarah. Okay?"

Sarah said nothing for some time, merely standing there, frozen stiff. But she soon began sniffing, looking at Elias.

Elias looked away, staring into the darkened forest.

"I won't let you die." He reiterated himself.

Sarah raised her arms and embraced Elias.

Watching their embrace from the distance--

"Again?" Kino sighed. She then uttered some words for Elias.

"Hey, kid... I don't want to kill you, okay? I don't need to. I just want to kill the girl and get this job over with. So why do you keep getting in my way?"

Kino was lying on her stomach about three hundred meters away. She had [Flute] mounted on a tripod, and was looking through the telescopic sight at just above ground level.

She had just discovered Elias and Sarah not too long ago, in the midst of tracking their footprints. Kino quietly approached them, reached persuader range, and lay down on the ground without caring that her clothes might get dirty. She adjusted the sight and took aim at the girl's chest on the other side of the crosshairs.

All she had to do now was pull the trigger.

"I don't believe this..."

But Elias got in her way.

Kino took her finger off the trigger. She waited, keeping her aim trained on the girl.

Sarah and Elias stood there in the circular frame, embracing and speaking to one another.

Kino waited.

They remained in their embrace for some time as Kino watched through the scope.

"Hurry up."

But no matter how much Kino complained under her breath, they would not separate.

"Please, give me a break."

Soon, Elias and Sarah looked at one another and began conversing.

" ... "

Kino waited. The girl nodded several times. It looked like they were finished talking.

Kino took a breath and exhaled lightly. She aimed precisely at the head with the pigtails and put her finger on the trigger.

"Hm...?"

Suddenly, her line of sight grew hazy. A grey mist rolled into her field of vision just as Sarah and Elias separated. They completely disappeared from view.

" ... "

It was the rain.

The sudden downpour of cold water enveloped the woods in a grey mist. Visibility dipped at once, and Kino could see no more than fifty meters ahead of her.

The telescopic sight was no longer of any use.

Kino quickly jumped to her feet and began to run. Holding [Flute] before her, she leapt through foliage and ran through the forest.

There were three hundred meters to her destination. Kino took care not to slip on the water as she continued to run.

She could soon see the bridge. Kino raised [Flute] to waist-level. Cautiously keeping watch on her surroundings in case of an ambush, she prepared herself to pull the trigger at any time as she approached the bridge with her footsteps silenced.

And once she finally arrived at the log bridge--

"..."

They were already gone. Kino looked around, [Flute] at the ready. All she could see were trees in the mist. The rain grew stronger by the second, soaking her hat, dripping down the brim, and covering her field of vision.

Kino began searching for their footprints by the bridge. She found none.

"..."

The heavy rain had cleared their footprints from the earth. Kino now had no way of knowing which direction they had gone in.

Surrounded by nothing but the sound of rain, Kino glared at the log bridge before her.

"Hah..."

She sighed, and instead of crossing the bridge, she turned away to return to the forest entrance where Hermes waited.

Kino fought through the torrential downpour and came back to Hermes. Everything was soaked--her hat, her jacket, her socks. Kino's head was bowed down slightly, and she was covering her eyes with the brim of her hat. [Flute] was slung over her back, the barrel pointing downwards.

"Welcome back, Kino. You look like a drowned rat. Did you get her?"

"..."

"Kino?"

Kino looked up.

"I'm done for today. Let's go back to the hotel." She said brusquely.

"Is that okay?" Hermes wondered.

"We still have tomorrow." Kino replied quickly.

"Are you sure?"

"No."

It was evening.

The rain cleared before sundown.

"I guess I just happened to get caught in the worst of it." Kino complained. She had taken a shower and was now waiting for her clothes to dry while wearing hotel-supplied pajamas. Just then--

"Excuse us."

Two suit-clad men stepped inside.

Kino offered the men a seat. One of the men sat on a chair. Kino sat opposite him at a small round table.

"Kino, how much longer will it take?" The man asked, sounding slightly irritated.

"I'll have the job done by tomorrow. I can't chase after her now that it's nighttime."

"You will get the job done, I hope?"

"Of course."

"Should you fail, we cannot supply you with your payment. Do you understand this?"

"Yes. If I fail to finish this job, I will quietly leave the country tomorrow evening without another word."

"We're counting on you, Kino. This is a grave matter indeed. If that girl should reveal this confidential information to the public, our company will be finished. Heads will roll, and thousands will be left jobless in the streets. We've sent our own people to keep an eye on places she is likely to take refuge in, but we've received no word so far from those locations."

"Maybe it's best no one finds her." Hermes said from beside the entrance. The men went silent.

Several seconds passed.

"It is dirty work. But..." One of the men said, "It is also work that will save many lives. Everyone is very grateful for your efforts. And we will be even more grateful should you succeed."

With that, the man got off his seat. Kino remained seated, watching the men walk towards the door.

"How grateful would you be?" Hermes asked as they left. The man answered:

"Enough to sing your praises."

While the traveler slept on clean pressed sheets at the hotel, Elias and Sarah were in a storage shed for farming gear.

Once the rain let up, they had walked through the woods and ended up in a field. They spotted this shed nearby, and after checking to make sure no one was inside, they decided to take shelter there for the night.

For dinner they shared a slightly under-ripe carrot. Elias had pulled it from the field, and sliced it to pieces with a knife they found in the hut.

They sat side-by-side on a hard piece of plywood, leaned against the wall, and fell asleep to the sound of buzzing insects.

The next day. It was the morning of Kino's third day in this country.

The sun had not yet risen, but Kino, Hermes, and the suit-clad men whom she had called over were in the middle of a strategy meeting.

They were in the deserted hotel restaurant. A man stood guard at the entrance, and there were teacups set on the table.

Kino was wearing her jacket, just dry enough that she could endure the clammy sensation. All of her belongings were secured to Hermes with elastic wire. Her coat was hanging from the luggage.

"You said that it would be a disaster if the girl revealed the secret. So is there anything that might act as evidence? And if so, where is it?" Kino asked the men.

The men tilted their heads and asked her what she meant by this.

"I gave this a bit of thought. If I were the girl, I would try to get a hold of solid evidence of my involvement in order to secure my safety, and take it away somewhere. After all, it's doubtful that anyone will believe my unsupported claims."

With this, the men understood her question and answered that the only places they could think of were the company office and the mansion in which she lived. They also added that she could not possibly approach either location because they were so heavily guarded.

"Then please have all personnel evacuate the girl's mansion. The house has to be emptied." Kino said. The men looked around at one another in confusion.

"This way, she'll come back to her home for the evidence." Kino said, "I'll hide in the mansion to ambush them. And I'd like a list of objects that she might try to use as evidence, as well as a map with directions to the mansion."

The men wondered if Kino's plan would really work.

"I believe we will have a better chance with this plan than trying to find an ordinary boy and girl in this huge country--within the day, at that."

Hearing this, the men finally agreed to Kino's plan. Promising to make arrangements immediately, they told Kino about the location of the mansion.

Once the men left to make arrangements,

"I wonder if things'll work out." Hermes wondered.

"Who knows?" Kino replied.

At that very moment--

"That's it! We just need to find proof that you're the one who sang the Diva's songs! Do you know anything that might help?" Elias asked, chewing on a piece of carrot.

The storage shed was still surrounded by morning mist. the world around them was covered in grey.

Sarah sat next to Elias, also nibbling on a piece of carrot, and answered.

"If we could just get to my house, we might. ...But I don't know anything about any documents..."

She thought for a moment.

"Wait! I've got it!"

"Really? What is it?"

"I have a record! I have a recording that didn't go over so well. They gave me the record as a gift, and it has a recording of me talking with the other Diva, me asking my vocal instructor about how I should sing, and the other adults talking. I'm sure that'll be perfect."

"Who's at your house?"

"Usually, it's just the butler and a few maids. The people from the company only came to pick me up."

"That's great! Let's go get it! And then we'll send it to a radio station or a newspaper company so everyone will know!"

"But... what about the people at the company?"

"Who cares about them?! They tried to kill you, Sarah! I'm going to make sure you make it through this safe and sound!"

The carrot Elias was holding snapped in two.

Sarah averted her gaze, a shadow cast over her face. She then quickly opened her eyes wide.

"Wait! But Elias, you'll end up getting caught! They're going to arrest you as a kidnapper!" Sarah said, meeting Elias's eyes. He was smiling.

"I don't mind."

"But kidnapping's an automatic life sentence! You'll spend the rest of your life in prison!"

"It's better than letting you die, Sarah."

"..."

Still seated on the floor, Elias turned to face Sarah. He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye.

"I haven't told you why I ended up working with those bad guys yet, have I? It's because I wanted one of those records. I wanted the Diva's record. But I knew that I couldn't afford records or gramophones even if I worked for years on end. That's why I joined up with them."

"..."

"So it doesn't matter if I make a lot of money, but the Diva dies. It's all right! I'm sure I'll be able to listen to the radio even in prison. Then I'll always know that you're doing all right!"

"..."

"I'm not going to let you die, Sarah! So let's go! Let's go find that record!"

Tears fell from Sarah's eyes. She drew near to his face and lightly kissed his forehead.

Elias flushed a bright shade of red.

"Then I'm going to save you, Elias. I'll sing under my own name and make enough money to rescue you, Elias! I promise!"

Through her tears, Sarah smiled.

"Fwaa..."

Kino yawned loudly.

"You sound so prepared, Kino." Hermes joked quietly.

They were in the middle of a garden, on the grounds of a vast and luxurious mansion.

In the garden, decorated with liberal amounts of white stone, was a terraced area with flower beds and a fountain.

And next to that opulent space was an even more lavish mansion. Behind it was a forest filled with well-trimmed trees dyed in the colors of fall.

Kino sat at the bottom of the terraces, beside the currently non-functional fountain. She lay down comfortably on a recliner and looked up at the cirrocumulus clouds in the autumn sky.

Hermes, loaded with all of Kino's belongings, was propped up on his center stand next to her. For now, they were hidden from sight of the mansion.

This was the great manor where Sarah had lived. The entire area was deserted, including the manor interior. Everyone had been relocated to another area.

Kino lifted an expensive-looking teacup from the table beside the bench and sipped some tea.

"Delicious. these tea leaves really are the best."

"It's nice to live large."

"All I have to do now is wait. And to be honest, I don't care if they don't come. The weather's great, and if nothing happens until nightfall, I just have to meet up with the merchants and leave with them."

"No motivation, huh? You know, you might never find that part anywhere after this. And what if they sue you for breaking a contract?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"The people from that company might try to arrest you, Kino."

"Then I'll either shoot them all down or leave you behind and escape through the sewers, through all that stink."

"Shoot them. Shoot them all, please. And then take everything we can and go."

"All right, I'll do that. I have plenty of ammunition, after all."

Kino and Hermes were having a rather terrifying conversation with exceptional nonchalance.

Atop the table was [Woodsman], equipped with a harmonica-style silencer. It glinted black under the morning sun.

The mansion was situated in a quiet neighborhood.

The streets were lined with great manors, each with a great deal of space between the other. It was a high-class neighborhood that could probably be prefixed with a "super", a completely different world from what Elias was used to.

The street lined with ginkgo trees was deserted, even though it was midday. This was because the people who owned the property in this area were all company officials, who had evacuated all residents from the area.

"It's already afternoon. Is she really going to come?" A man complained.

"Who knows?" Another replied.

Two middle-aged men in suits were in a house just across the mansion where Kino lay in wait. Then men sat in chairs set up by the window, keeping an eye on the street through the curtains.

Lying between beverage bottles and half-eaten pieces of bread was a rifle equipped with a telescopic sight. It was a low-caliber rifle designed for shooting animals that could harm humans.

It was just when one of the men came to change shifts--

"There's a car coming." The man looking through a small telescope said. The other man hurriedly peeked out the window, and saw just that--a taxi with a sign atop it.

The taxi slowly passed by the mansion, then doubled back. It then stopped. The door opened.

The taxi soon drove away, revealing a girl with her hair in pigtails and a boy around her age.

"That's her! That's definitely Miss Sarah!"

"So the boy next to her must be one of the kidnappers! Just like the traveler told us!"

The boy and the girl looked around for a moment, then approached the mansion doors.

"Shit!"

One of the two men picked up the rifle. He lay flat beside the window and opened it a crack. He took aim and loaded the persuader.

"All right. Shoot her. If you manage to kill her, the company won't have to pay the traveler anything!"

"But... what if we could just capture Miss Sarah and make her promise to keep it all a secret?"

"That's like trying to take responsibility for a time bomb. This is for all of us. For the company."

"But we--the company... We made so much money thanks to Miss Sarah."

The man ground his teeth at his companion's weakness.

In the end, the man with the rifle kept his aim trained on Sarah but did not shoot. She disappeared into the mansion. He armed the safety on the rifle, having done nothing, and turned to his companion.

"We don't need to get our hands dirty. The traveler will do something for us. It's not our fault."

You're fooling yourself, the other man thought, but he did not speak out loud.

Kino was lying on the recliner, fast asleep with her hat over her face.

"Kino."

Hermes woke her up.

"Hm?"

"Looks like you were right. I'll see you soon."

"Aw, man..."

Kino slowly sat up.

She put her hat on her head and took hold of [Woodsman].

"What is all this?" Elias breathed as he stepped into the entrance hall.

The lobby was decorated with vases and paintings. There was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The stairs, the halls, then entire house was almost unnecessarily too spacious.

As Elias stood in awe of that luxury--

"This way!"

Sarah took him by the hand and pulled him along. The hallway stretched towards either side, but they turned to the right. The manor was deserted.

"Isn't there anyone here? I feel like all the other houses around here were empty, too..." Elias said suspiciously. His right hand was already on the persuader he concealed in his jacket pocket.

"I don't know. Maybe they're all busy. Everyone who lives around here works for the company, you see. But you have to promise me one thing." Sarah said, turning towards Elias. He nodded.

"All right. I won't shoot the butler or the maids. I'm just going to make threats."

They ran through the long hallway passing by paintings and flowers. They could see the central garden from the windows to their left, but they saw no one outside.

Soon--

"Here."

Sarah stopped at the end of the hallway, at the door to a certain room.

On their right side, opposite the windows looking over the garden, was a heavy wooden door. Sarah reached for the doorknob and opened it.

They stepped inside.

Suddenly, Sarah stopped in place. Elias walked right into her.

"Whoa! Hey-"

Elias then realized why she had stopped.

The room was vast and luxurious, but still bore a hint of childlike innocence. Opposite the room from the door was a bed decorated with a veil.

Sitting on that bed was a person in a black jacket. They sat facing forward, with the sunlight filtering through the window behind them.

The lighting made it difficult to see the person's face, but Elias could tell that the stranger was very young, only a little older than himself.

The person was looking at Elias and Sarah, holding a persuader in their left hand.

"Wh-who are you...?" Sarah asked.

"No one worth knowing, and no one who wants to be known." Kino said calmly, looking at the girl. "I'm just the person who was hired to kill your kidnapper."

Sarah flinched. Elias, standing behind her with a look of fury, glared at Kino. Kino could not see, but his right hand was in front of him.

"So you're that murderer!" Elias roared. Kino said nothing, but nodded lightly.

"I'm the one you're after!" Sarah said in a shaky voice. "You've been hired to kill me, right? You just want to kill me because of those secrets!"

"Well... Yes. I see you're well-informed on the situation."

"This boy has nothing to do with anything! Please!"

"I'm the kidnapper!" Elias cried. He scowled at the killer, baring his teeth. "If you want to kill Sarah, you're gonna have to go through me! Kill me!"

"I'd rather not, if possible."

"Shut up! You're not going to hurt Sarah, you murderer!" Elias bellowed indignantly. The killer narrowed her eyes.

"I won't deny your accusations, but..."

"But... That makes no difference. I will not shoot you unless you point a persuader at me."

Kino raised [Woodsman] into the air.

"I won't let you kill her!"

Elias pushed Sarah down to the floor with his left hand. At the same time, he drew his persuader with his right hand.

Glass shattered.

There was a faint sound like something breaking.

"Ugh!"

Kino grimaced in pain and threw herself to the side of the bed. She ducked, almost dropping [Woodsman], but she quickly caught it in midair.

The boy before her finally drew his persuader.

Normally, Kino would have taken aim much more quickly--that is, if the bullet that was fired through the window from the outside hadn't grazed her left shoulder and got in her way.

The moment she saw the boy push the girl to the ground and draw his persuader, Kino rolled off of the bed. After a turn and a half, she fell off its edge and onto the ground, between the bed and the window.

"Ouch."

She hit her head against the wall.

"Run!"

Instead of pulling the trigger when his opponent dove out of sight, Elias pulled Sarah along with his left hand, which had been holding onto her all this time.

Sarah staggered backwards as though she was about to collapse. The moment she stepped through the door, Elias pushed her back and stood her up straight.

"Go!"

Pushed by Elias, Sarah began to run.

"Go!"

Hearing the boy's voice and their footsteps growing more distant, Kino first shut the curtains, hiding under the frames and pulling the curtains to darken the room.

Watching that window from a distance--

"You idiot! Why did you shoot the traveler?!"

"I... I can't do this... This is wrong..."

The rifle slipped out of the man's hand and hit the floor.

"This is insane... Miss Sarah is over there. What are we doing? What the hell are we doing right now?"

The man was in a complete state of confusion.

"Shit!"

The other man slapped him across the face, knocking him unconscious and sending him falling to the floor louder than the falling rifle.

"This is enough, Elias! I'm going to surrender! You have to get away!"

"I'm not going to let you do that!"

Elias pulled Sarah along with his left hand, running down the long hallway with his persuader in his right.

Kino stepped over the bed with her shoes still on, and headed towards the hallway.

She took several steps, and lightly fingered the wound on her upper left arm. There was a long horizontal tear in her jacket, and blood was faintly staining her shirt. When Kino pulled back her sleeve, she noted that the bullet had left her with a 5-centimeter graze. The wound was long, but it did not seem very deep.

Kino took her fingers off the wound and looked at her jacket, irritated.

"Who's supposed to mend this jacket now?"

She then ducked, poking her head into the hallway and looking to her left.

She could see Elias and Sarah running away in the distance. Their forms grew smaller by the second.

Kino sat on the floor, pushed herself forward, and raised her left arm upright.

"...That hurts."

Her arm trembled slightly.

Sarah and Elias had made it to the entrance to the lobby. Elias twisted around, pulling Sarah along, and entered the entrance hall as he pushed over a vase at the entryway. A red dot suddenly swung into the spot where Sarah had been just a moment ago.

Once they disappeared from view, Kino stood up. She took [Woodsman] in her right hand and placed her left hand atop it.

"..."

Taking aim at the end of the hallway with both hands, she began to walk.

Elias stepped on the flower that had fallen from the vase as he poked his head out into the hallway.

About twenty meters ahead was the killer, walking calmly with the persuader pointed in their direction. Elias quickly ducked back around the corner.

He looked around the entranceway. The hall also led down in the opposite direction, but that area was already within range for the killer. The mansion doors were closed.

"We can't go outside..." Elias mumbled. He desperately looked around, and caught sight of Sarah sitting helplessly on the carpeted floor.

"I'll keep you safe, Sarah!" He cried. Suddenly, he noticed a large metallic tank standing against the wall behind her. Attached to the tank was a hose and a yellow lever.

Elias put down his persuader and reached for the tank. Dragging the object, which was about half his own height, he walked over to the boundary between the hallway and the lobby.

He untied the hose with his left hand and put his right hand on the lever. Elias then poked his head out into the hallway. With his left eye he spotted the killer, now just ten meters away.

Elias did not try to hide his face behind the corner. He operated the lever with his right hand. White foam sprayed from the hose in his right hand, filling the hallway with white in an instant.

He quickly took hold of his persuader.

"AAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Screaming like a madman, he leapt into the hallway and began firing at random, not even taking proper aim at the killer.

"This is getting messy..." Kino mumbled standing out in the garden.

The moment Elias made his move with the fire extinguisher, Kino opened the glass door into the garden and made her escape. The hallway was now completely white, as though it was filled with smoke. She could not see a thing.

"What's wrong, Kino? You're not doing so well today." Hermes asked loudly from the bottom of the terraces.

Kino slipped down the terraces and crouched down onto the ground. She looked up at the fumes from the extinguisher escaping through the window she had left through.

"This is harder than I thought. That boy's both desperate and reckless. I'd rather be fighting someone who was used to shootouts, since I could at least have an idea of what they would do... It's always harder to fight a novice."

"Excuses, excuses. Just be careful he doesn't start shooting in this direction."

"I'll have to try." Kino answered. On her right, she could see Sarah and Elias running towards the other end of the mansion, through the hallway.

"Well, I guess I'll have to change my strategy."

Not realizing that Kino was watching, Elias and Sarah ran into one of the rooms.

Elias chose a door at random as he ran through the hallway, and stepped inside. The first thing he saw was a fully stuffed bookshelf.

It was a study with no windows. The floor-length shelves filled the room, from the walls to the space in the middle of the room.

As he closed the door shut--

"Please run, Elias. Just leave me and go." Sarah said, choking down a sob.

Just as Elias made to shake his head and speak, they heard a deep, low rumble.

Unlike the shots from before, which had been muted by the silencers, these gunshots were loud and powerful. They soon heard the glass in the hallway breaking.

Elias had Sarah lay on her stomach, flat against the floor. The sound started from their right, then steadily broke vases and glass as it passed over the study and headed to their left.

"Damn it... He just won't give up."

"Elias, I'm begging you!"

Elias ignored Sarah's plea.

As the gunshots continued, Elias looked down at his own persuader. The bolt had come down fully. He took out a spare magazine and replaced the empty one.

Copying what Juan did on the car, Elias pulled the lever. The bolt pushed the ammunition into the firing chamber and returned to its place.

Kino was firing away at the hallway with [Flute], which she had unpacked from Hermes. She was not aiming at any particular location--she fired about thirty rounds, changing magazines, with the intent to shatter all the glass in the hallway that they had escaped to.

Afterwards, Kino produced a small vial filled with green liquid gunpowder. She changed the cap to one that was equipped with a fuse, and lit it with a match.

She lobbed it with all her might. It hit the wall near the lobby and exploded.

A powerful blast rocked the air. Any remaining glass finally shattered to pieces. The walls near the explosion collapsed and caught on fire. Smoke rose into the blue sky.

The man who happened to be watching the mansion from the opposite side anxiously placed a telephone call.

"Never mind, just call them over! The fire department, too! The traveler's practically causing war in that mansion!"

As bullets drove themselves into walls and explosions went off--

"No... please, no more..."

Sarah was lost in a state of panic. She sat crouched under a desk, covering her ears.

Elias could do little but stand there, awkwardly aiming his persuader and glaring at the heavy door he had closed.

He soon heard something. The sound of footsteps on broken glass.

Someone was coming down the halls. It was unmistakably approaching the study where they were hiding.

"Damn it..."

Elias took aim at the door, cold sweat running down his face.

The footsteps were closer than ever now. He could hear the crunching of glass being crushed underfoot.

The sound stopped just before the study door.

"..."

The doorknob twisted slowly.

Click. The lock was undone.

Elias ran. He sprinted at full speed towards the door ahead of him, and slammed it open with his shoulder.

The moment he stepped out into the hall, Elias saw the killer standing to his immediate left.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

He quickly raised his right arm, took aim, and pulled the trigger. The killer also swung their persuader at Elias. With a sharp clang like the sound of sword clashing, the killer's persuader knocked Elias's persuader off angle.

Elias's shot was driven into the ceiling.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

He continued to pull the trigger. He kept pulling the trigger over and over again at the killer. But the killer kept deflecting him by throwing off his aim with the persuader in their right hand.



And just like the first, all of Elias's shots missed. The persuader's bolt was now fully lowered. He had no ammunition left.

The killer kicked at Elias, striking him square in the gut. Elias's little form flew into the hallway.

"Oof!"

Shards of glass drove themselves into his hands and buttocks.

Kino adjusted her form and looked around at the interior of the study.

The girl was crouching there, looking up towards Kino.

Kino raised her right hand and took aim at the boy at the end of the hall with [Woodsman].

"No!" The girl cried, but Kino decided to ignore her.

His hands were red with blood. The killer's persuader was pointed at him.

"Not yet! I can still fight!" Elias cried, getting to his feet. The smoke from the lobby left the hallway with a slight haze.

"You don't know a thing about Sarah! There's no way I'm going to let you kill her!" He bellowed, blood running down his tightly clenched fists.

Kino looked at the boy, who was still burning with energy.

"Master would have been a lot more elegant about a job like this..." She mumbled to herself, and slowly raised [Woodsman]. The light from the laser began to move through the hall.

But at that moment, she heard the song.

"...?"

Kino turned around to look at its source.

"..."

The girl was singing. Though tears were falling from her eyes, she was singing the very song Kino had heard two days ago.

"I won't let you hurt her..."

Kino glanced at the hallway. The boy was glaring at her.

"There's no way I'd let you kill the greatest Diva in the world!" He cried, picking up a shard of glass. He grasped the makeshift knife tightly without worrying about the wounds it left on his hands.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!"

He charged at Kino.

Kino quickly tripped him. The boy fell forward helplessly. The shard of glass he held flew off somewhere, and the boy was again cut by the debris on the floor.

As the boy lay groaning on the floor,

"..."

Kino practically ignored him as she looked at the girl, who sang with tears in her eyes. She listened to the song in awe.

The girl finally finished the song and opened her eyes.

"What happened to the other Diva?" Kino asked.

"She was sick for a very long time. I think she must have passed away." The girl answered honestly. She then added: "That's why they want to kill me. They don't want the secret to get out."

"I see. So that's why they hired me." Kino nodded in understanding. As she did, the girl added that she had no family, and no one to mourn her death. But she begged Kino to spare the boy.

"But I still have a job to do." Kino replied, but remembered something. "Ah, but... Of course. I had another job."

The boy on the floor weakly raised his head and glared at Kino.

Kino ignored the boy and drew a knife from her right sleeve. She shot the boy a glance and stepped into the study, disappearing from his field of vision.

"No!" The boy cried.

Kino stood before the girl.

"I'm sorry."

She swung her knife at the girl's neck.

A group of suit-clad men stood by the burning mansion. A fire truck was there as well, but it was not yet putting out the flames. The men merely watched the mansion go up in smoke.

Everyone whispered and wondered what was going on, but no one had an answer.

Soon, the mansion was entirely engulfed. It began to collapse from the edges out.

"What about the traveler?" One of the men said, finally remembering Kino, but at that very moment, they all heard the sound of an engine rumbling.

Kino came to them on Hermes, along the garden boundary between this mansion and the next. As soon as she made it to the road, the men crowded around her.

"How did it go?"

Kino's face was covered in soot, but the men concerned themselves only with the job they had given her. Kino was a little angered by this, but she stepped off Hermes without complaint.

"Here."

She then took a large sack from atop Hermes, loaded beside her travel gear. The men blanched.

It was a cream-colored sack with a handle, one they might find at any marketplace. It was stuffed with something, like Kino had put a melon inside.

The cloth was red and damp. Something was sticking out of the bag--a pair of pigtails.

"I've finished the job. No one could survive being beheaded, wouldn't you agree? I have my proof. Would you like to take a look?" Kino asked with a smile. The men staggered backwards, white as a sheet.

"The boy who was with her should be in the fire there. I haven't confirmed his death, so please shoot him at your leisure when he tries to escape." She said, holding out the sack to the man nearest to her.

"Should I exchange this for my reward?"

"D-don't come near me!" The man cried, falling as his knees gave away.

"Then what about you?" Kino asked the next man. He turned and ran.

"Hah... Then I guess I'll just have to throw it away." Kino said, sounding annoyed. She waited several seconds for their answer.

"Hup!"

She swung the sack round and let go of it at a certain point.

The pigtails swung in the air as the sack flew towards the mansion in an arc, soon disappearing into the flames.

The men watched the sight, dumbstruck. One of them received a faceful of blood from when Kino had tossed the sack.

"And that's all for my end of the bargain. Whew, that was rough." Kino said, holding out her hand towards one of the men. Her hand was covered in red.

"..."

One of the men came forward with the box containing the jewels and the metal part. The man hesitated for a moment, then placed the box on her hand and fled.

Kino first opened the box and looked inside. Confirming the presence of the jewels, she closed it once more.

Kino stuffed the box next to her sleeping bag, on Hermes's luggage seat. She wrapped up the metal engine part in a scrap of cloth and placed it inside the box next to Hermes's wheel.

"Please... Leave us..." Said one of the men. Kino nodded and climbed onto Hermes.

She then remembered something and asked one last thing of the men.

"Who was the one that shot me?"

The men began to murmur in bewilderment. But no one had an answer for her.

"Please let him know that he's a terrible shot." Kino said, raising the side stand and starting Hermes.

"Goodbye, everyone."

With that, Kino drove through the crowd of men, who continued to glare daggers at her.

As she quickly disappeared into the distance--

"Go to hell, you murderer." One of the men said.

Kino left the residential district, and was now riding along a road with a pond to her left.

"A hundred and ten, a hundred and eleven..." Hermes was muttering.

Kino twisted back slightly as she rode, pulling out the box of jewels she had just received.

"It's a shame, but I just don't have time."

She tossed the box away. It fell into the water.

"Two hundred."

A powerful explosion sounded from behind Kino. A column of water spouted from the pond, and mud from the lakebed splashed into the air. The sparking gems that were inside soon sank into the pond.

"That was way too predictable." Hermes said, astonished.

"Which makes it easier for me to react." Kino said joyfully. She then added:

"We're going to be a lot busier now. I guess first we'll have to go see the merchant."

A merchant caravan was slowly driving through the world lit up by the setting sun.

They were outside the country now. With the brightly lit ramparts behind them, the eight horse-drawn carriages slowly made their way along the firm dirt roads.

Hermes was following along a little to the left and rear of the last carriage, traveling at low gear. Kino was wearing her coat, and had [Flute] slung over her back.

They continued through the forest for some time, until the ramparts were tiny lines in the distance. The merchant who sat by the coachman on the last carriage turned to Kino.

"Kino. Now, I know I'm the one who talked to you about buying merchandise to sell at the next country, but are you sure you could sell these? They smell like they walked out of the gutter." He asked.

"Yes. Probably." Kino said loudly so the merchant could hear.

"Well, I guess that's none of my business. But anyway, I think we'll have to give the food we set aside for you to your merchandise here. They're two whole mouths to feed, you know."

"I'll be all right. I have portable rations for myself."

"C'mon, don't act so tough, Kino."

As Kino and Hermes bantered by themselves, two people poked their heads out from under the canopy of the last carriage.

One was a girl with short hair.

The other was a boy with cuts all over his face and his hand bandaged.

Their clothes, soaking wet from the sewers, were by no means acceptably clean.

They watched the ramparts of their homeland grow smaller in the distance--the land where they were born and raised.

Their eyes met those of the killer on the motorrad at the back of the caravan.

"..."

The boy glared at her without a word.

The girl smiled faintly.

She took a deep breath.

And she began to sing.

A beautiful song echoed from the carriage traveling through the dusk.

The merchant quickly looked back.

"Hm? Well, what do you know?"

He said nothing more, merely watching the singing girl. He smiled.

The carriages continued lazily under the setting sun, disappearing into the sunset with the Diva's song.

Epilogue

“A Certain Man’s Journey · a”

— Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa · a —



Epilogue: “A Certain Man’s Journey · a” — Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa. · a —
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Journey, and Vice Versa. · a—

A long time ago, when Kino still lived with the old lady she called Master.

When her hair was still long.

One clear day, a man on horseback came to the log cabin.

He had a beard, a worn leather jacket, a ten-gallon hat, and a worn revolver-rifle on his back. He looked over fifty years of age.

He happened to pass by the forest road and greeted Kino and the old lady, who were on the deck, hanging up sheets to dry. Then he asked if they could bear to part with some water and fodder.

The old lady replied genially and Kino filled up the horse.

They invited the man to tea on the cabin deck. And a little tea party between three people began.

—

“Wow. Did you really travel for that long?”

So asked a deeply interested Kino upon hearing the man’s story.

Epilogue: “ A Certain Man’s Journey · a ” — Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa. · a —
He said he had traveled upwards of thirty years. He went by many means—bicycles in technologically-advanced countries, camels in deserts, horses in grass-rich meadows, skiing in cold places, and even with his own two feet, depending on the location.

“I have a goal, see.”

Now that he said it, Kino asked what it could be.

—

“By traveling...”

The man began.

“I hope to rid this world of ‘gravity’.”

“Gravity? Is that the thing that explains why things fall when you let them go?”

“That’s right. Where I grew up, people lived above and under mountains as tall as towers. So there were times when people fell. My family, for instance. On the way home, a leg slipped, and everyone but I went up to God.”

He narrowed his eyes and continued.

“Therefore, I thought that gravity had to be gone from this world for everyone to live happily. But I couldn’t think of how to do that. I left home to find people who would know, and here I am, traveling.”

Epilogue: “ A Certain Man’s Journey · a ” — Life is a Journey, and Vice Versa. · a —
The man asked the old lady if perhaps she knew the method.

She set down her cup and shook her head.

But the man did not show a flicker of disappointment.

“I’ve went to many countries, but I still haven’t found anyone who knows how. There were some who told me I was hoping for the impossible. But I won’t give up. I’ll keep on looking until I die. I believe that the day will come when I find out and go home with a smile.”

Kino no Tabi Volume 10

—the Beautiful World—

Story Keiichi Sigsawa

Illustrations Kouhaku Kuroboshi

Translators Ella

 Matt122004

 Untuned Strings

(<http://untuned-strings.blogspot.ca/p/index-kino.html>)

Editor BloodyKitty

 Dammitt

 Shuijie

 User753 (PDF Only)

Project Hosted at www.baka-tsuki.org



9784840235808

ISBN4-8402-3580-5

C0193 ¥570E



ASCII
MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **570 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます



1920193005707

